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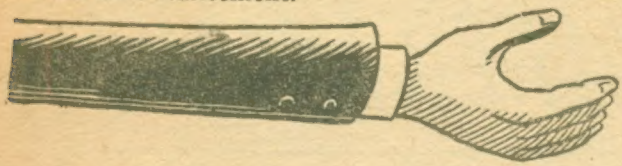

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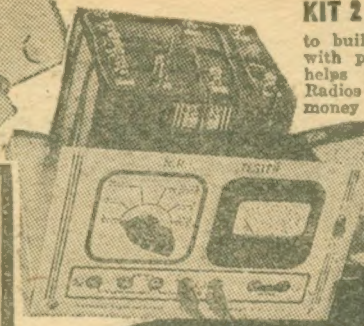

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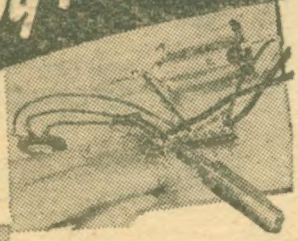

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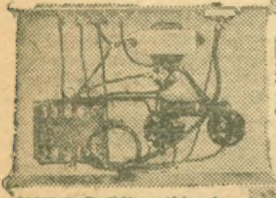

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Something smashed against Big John's head from behind. He remembered drawing his gun, then . . .

Two years ago, Marshall had come into Sutter's room in New Helvetia; he had bolted the door and pulled low the blinds, and he had shown Sutter the nugget. "It's gold, Sutter! Hear me, it's gold!" And suddenly the land was changed, ripped asunder by the passions of lust for quick wealth; gone was all that hard-working men had built up peacefully, gone was hard-won law and order. And no man could stay out of the turmoil . . .

1

BIG JOHN MATTHEWS was in his office behind his saloon, working with his goldscales, when the sound of men arguing seeped through the heavy plank door that led to the gambling-tables and bar of the Scarlet Flower. He scowled, his darkly handsome face showing his irritation. He set a nugget on the scales.

"One ounce and eleven grams."

Edwina repeated, "One ounce and eleven grams," and wrote the figures in her book. She was still and quiet, then—a light-haired, middle-aged woman; she listened to voices rising beyond the door.

"What the hell's goin' on?" Big John growled.

He put the nugget in the buckskin poke that held the gold already weighed and took another nugget from the unweighed sack. The door opened, letting in the voices and George Denham, his house-man, entered. Denham jerked his head toward the gambling room.

"You'd best get out there, Big John."

"Why? Can't you handle it?"

Denham showed his thin, fine smile, his eyes taking in Edwina, whose blue eyes were sharp and bright. He lifted his well-tailored shoulders and let his cigaret droop in his thin lips.

"Yes, I can handle it, Big John. But I might have to use my gun—and you wouldn't want that, would you?"

Big John got to his feet. He said, "Eddie, you stay here," and his roughness drew a sharp look from the woman's eyes. He looked at George Denham. "Who is it?" he asked.

"El Gibbs, for one. Gibbs has got Salinas with him. From what it looks like, I'd say the two of them were putting the squeeze on the kid." Denham threw his cigaret neatly into the spitton. "I've seen it done too many times before not to know all the earmarks, Big John."

"The kid?"

"Les Cowan."

Edwina said, hurriedly, "You'd better get Cowan out of there, Big John. He's got a wife and a new baby—"

Big John Matthews said, roughly, "I told Cowan to head for home about three hours ago."

George Denham shrugged. "He's got it in his blood. It's working there and driving him—gold fever and gambling."

Big John walked into the long room, with Denham following. The early California sun was topping a frame building across the street, throwing its clean light over Rough'n Tough town. Besides the swamper, who was cleaning up behind the bar, there were only three customers in the Scarlet Flower, and these three were at a gaming-table across the wide room.

Les Cowan said, angrily, "Damn it, El Gibbs, I played that king of hearts. You played the nine of spades and you know damn' well you did!"

Big John saw El Gibbs shake his thick head slowly. Gibbs' jowls were heavy with anger. Apparently they were so wrapped in their argument none of the three had heard Big John or Denham approach, for the sawdust muffled a man's boots, here in the saloon's gambling section.

"You want trouble," Cowan stated flatly. "You've been pushing for it, even when the other players were in the game."

Cowan got up, pushing back his chair; his knuckles, grasping the top of the chair, were pulled and tight. He had his other hand on his belt in front of his .44 pistol. El Gibbs, too, had risen, but his hand was on his gun's handle; across the table, Jose Salinas sat silent, but Big John noticed the Californio had his gun out, the weapon lying idle on his lap. And, because he saw this, he knew what the play would be; he knew, then, Jose Salinas would kill young Les Cowan. For Cowan would watch El Gibbs, and Jose Salinas would shoot around the edge of the table.

Big John asked, harshly, "What's the matter here?"

HIS WORDS stopped El Gibbs. They brought the naked anger out of his face, spread the color and made it run back. He asked, "Is this your play, Big John?"

"I own this bar. It has a clean reputation. So far, not a gunfight has taken place here; and I don't intend to let one happen, either."

Jose Salinas was very quiet, very calm. He brought up his left hand and it lay on the table, still and with the dark fingers spread almost lazily. The Californio's dark eyes were quiet, too.

George Denham stood and watched Salinas. The house-man watched him with an unblinking stare. Salinas looked at Denham, looked at him for a second, his face without thoughts, and then he lifted his right hand. He

left his gun lying on his thighs.

"That's much better," Denham said.

Big John had caught the play and he walked over and took Salinas' gun. He broke it and kicked the cartridges into the sawdust and threw the weapon out the door. It ran across the sunlight and landed beside a burro tied outside. It plowed into the dust and became hidden.

For the first time, Les Cowan knew that Salinas had had a gun. And, for a moment, his face lost its hardness, and fear scrawled itself across his lips. He swallowed and said, "Thanks, men."

Denham shrugged. Big John said, "You got eyes in your rump, son." He looked at the cards. "What's the matter?"

Elton Gibbs said, "Cowan there accused me of cheating."

Big John looked at Les Cowan questioningly.

Cowan said, "We were playing stud. I was dealt a king of hearts and was building a flush. Just then Salinas accidentally pushed some of my chips on the floor. I picked them up and when I got my hand up again the king was gone and a nine of spades was in its place."

Big John glanced at George Denham, who smiled a little. This was an old, old trick. Big John asked, "And you still figure Salinas accidentally spilled those chips, Cowan?"

"Not now I don't?"

Salinas said, very slowly, "Don't rub me, tinhorn. Don't stroke Salinas' fur the wrong way."

"I'll rub you, Californio."

Salinas shook his head slowly.

El Gibbs spoke quickly. "Then you accuse me of cheating, eh, Big John? You say I switched the nine for that king? Is that it?"

"Pick up your chips," Big John Matthews ordered. "Bring them to the bar and I'll cash them into dust for you."

"We've got something to settle." El Gibbs was insistant. "This punk accused me of cheating; you did the same. This punk won't fight—"

Les Cowan started around the table toward El Gibbs. Big John put his arm out and held the young miner.

"Cash in your chips," Big John said, "and then leave."

COWAN settled back. Gibbs' eyes were sullen. "All right," he said, at length. Big John turned to go to his bar and Gibbs shot out a boot to trip him. George Denham kicked the man on the shin and Big John turned.

Salinas had moved a little, then he checked that move for he looked up at George Denham's little derringer.

Salinas asked, "Where did you get that?"

Denham did not answer that. He spoke to Big John. "There has to be trouble, I guess. He won't let it go by without having trouble, Big John." He had never taken his eyes off Jose Salinas.

Cowan said, doggedly, "This is my trouble, Big John."

El Gibbs hit at Big John. The blow, unexpected, turned the big man a little, and almost unsprung his knees. Gibbs hit again. He hit hard and savage, for he had the odds in his favor; his surprise-attack had given them to him. He hit, and he missed, and he went ahead, following his fist.

Big John Matthews' mouth was twisted a little, and blood showed on one corner. George Denham moved back a little, still watching Jose Salinas, who still sat silent in his chair. Young Les Cowan said quickly, "Damn it, Denham, this is my battle, not Big John's—"

Denham shook his head, eyes showing an old wisdom. "Be good, Cowan," he said. "Be good."

Cowan stepped back and watched. From the office doorway, Edwina watched, too. George Denham looked at her a second and Salinas moved a little. Denham whipped his eyes back. He didn't watch the fight; he kept watching Jose Salinas.

Big John, the first shock gone, had pulled his massive head down, hiding it behind a high shoulder. Gibbs was circling him, fists at his sides as he watched and waited, and Big John was turning, ready for the miner's rush. Still, Gibbs kept circling, hobnails roughing the sawdust; still, Big John turned, fists always up, watch-

ing the squat man move.

They moved beyond the tables into the clearing. Here was the dance-floor, made of smooth redwood, and Gibbs' hobnails tore into this, marking his passage. Gibbs moved in, suddenly, quickly. He made his bid.

Big John Matthews had awaited it. Now, he moved to one side, and Gibbs missed. The miner walked into the saloon-man's fists and Big John clipped him three times. They were short, six-inch blows.

They dropped Elton Gibbs.

Big John jumped back, but already Gibbs had wrapped his short arms around his legs. They went down, with Big John falling ahead, falling on Gibbs. Gibbs pulled his legs around and buried his head into Big John's belly.

Les Cowan had a billy from behind the bar. He came around the bar, the shot-loaded billy upright, and George Denham said sharply, "Don't use that, Cowan!"

Cowan stopped. He looked at Denham, then at Edwina, and Edwina, still standing in the doorway, shook her head.

She said, "Let them fight."

"A fight is a funny thing." George Denham spoke almost as though amused. "You got to let a fight run its course. If you stop them, they fight later on. So they might just as well fight now as later."

"Tough one," said Jose Salinas.

For El Gibbs had sprawled on his face. One of Big John's fists had put him down. Gibbs' flannel shirt was hanging around his belt, and his gun had dropped somewhere in the sawdust. Big John's silk shirt was in ribbons, showing the skin underneath, white and marked by a redness that came from pummelling fists.

NOW Big John moved ahead; El Gibbs rolled over. Gibbs hit Big John's legs and they rolled together. Both were running out of wind. Gibbs got on his belly and Big John got on him. He put his right knee against Gibbs' spine, bracing it below the man's neck. He cupped his hands under Gibbs' jaw and put on the pressure.

Gibbs fought the hands, pawing at them, trying to bite, trying to scratch. His breath came in sobbing curses. Still, Big John pulled, muscles rising on his forearms. Slowly, he lifted Gibbs' head, bent it back.

Gibbs had a solid, thick neck. Yet, slowly, surely, it lifted, bent. The man's head came up and his terrified, widening eyes met those of George Denham.

Gibbs panted, "Denham, he'll kill me—"

Denham moved forward and said, "Big John, that's enough. Don't kill the scum, Big John."

Big John Matthews didn't release his hold. Suddenly Gibbs screamed. It was a wild, terrible scream. It stopped men on the street and brought them hurriedly inside.

Edwina ran and grabbed Big John by the shoulders. She tugged, he didn't move; she slapped him—once, twice, three times. He said, "Don't, woman," and she slapped again.

Big John released Elton Gibbs' head. The head dropped and Gibbs lay silent. The saloon-man got to his feet. Edwina had his hand, "Come with me, Big John." She looked quickly at George Denham. "Is he dead?"

"He might be," Denham said.

2

EDWINA got Big John Matthews in his office and into his wide chair. She put the gold scales and nuggets and gold-dust to one side and Big John lowered his massive, beaten head on the hardwood desk. He kept his head like that while she went to the cabinet and came back with iodine and some bandages.

He said, without looking up, "Did I kill him, Eddie?"

"I don't know." She uncorked the iodine, fingers trembling. She set it to one side, the stopper part-ways out of the bottle. "Sometimes I wonder why I ever married a saloon-keeper."

"Don't you quit me," he said.

She smiled and went out on the back-porch where she pumped a basin

full of water from the reservoir. "We've been married for eleven years," she said. "I guess I won't run out. Here, let me look at that pretty face of yours."

She washed his face carefully, mothering him; he smiled a little, but the effort hurt him.

"I hope I didn't kill him."

She had no answer.

"I had to help young Cowan. Of course, he got into that mess himself—he ought to have had sense enough to know Silanas and Gibbs were setting a trap for him. He was silent for ten seconds. "I did right, didn't I?"

"They'd have killed him, if you hadn't interfered."

Les Cowan came in. He closed the door and said, "He's alive. The doc got him out of it. He walked out under his own power."

Edwina's face lost its tension.

The silence grew. Finally Cowan said, "I want to thank you, Big John. I'm ignorant, I guess. I should've known they wanted trouble with me. I should have stayed clear of their table."

"You're not ignorant." This time Big John did smile. "You just don't know this country and its men; you're not in Vermont, now. Poker is a disease. Some men can fight it off; they've got the resistance. You haven't."

"I can quit."

"You'll have to show me."

George Denham had come in. He had stood silent. Now he said, "Big John is right, Cowan. Some men can fight it; some can't. You ought to fight it, too; you've got a fine wife and a fine baby. You've got a good education. While the others washed the creeks for colors, you went back on the ridge and found quartz gold. Their pannings played out and yours is good for years. Now El Gibbs and Jose Salinas want your claim. They tried to buy and you wouldn't sell; they kept on trying in a nice way. They couldn't get you to sell. So they stripped off their masks in that poker game and decided to drive you to your gun so they could kill you."

Les Cowan's boyish face was a little pale. Finally he said, "I see that, now. I see it—now."

Big John said, "You'd better head for home, Cowan. Right now I'll bet your missus is plenty worried, you staying away all night."

Cowan said, "Thanks again."

Big John spoke quickly. "For blazes sake, forget it and get out of here."

Cowan looked at him, glanced at George Denham, and shrugged. He went outside and they heard his boots cross the dance-hall floor. Edwina put some iodine on a cut on Big John's jaw. He winced and gritted his teeth. She put a hand-mirror in front of him.

"How do you look, tough gink?"

Big John grinned. "Like a patchwork quilt, with this stuff on me." He gave her back the mirror.

Denham said, "I'll head up to my room for some shut-eye, Big John. There's always another night, you know."

THE SLIM, well-dressed gambler went out the back door. Edwina was putting her medicine away and Big John noticed her fingers were not too steady.

"I'm sorry, honey, but Gibbs pushed me too hard."

She put the lid down. "I guess it had to come, sooner or later. Gibbs has been putting too much pressure on you and young Cowan was your relief-valve."

He smiled. "I'm no steam engine."

Her words were stronger. "You know full well what I mean. When this town wasn't here—when Rough'n Tough wasn't even thought of—you and I ran this as a depot for the Overland Stages. We were happy then; we didn't have this tough, rough mining crowd to hound us."

"It'll come back to that."

She shook her head stubbornly.

"Why won't it?"

"The placer mines will play out, sure. Some of them are going out of gold already. Those miners will leave; they'll have to leave. They'll go over to Nevada City or Grass Valley or further down into the Mother Lode. When Marshall found gold two

years ago in Sutter's race this country was changed from that minute on. But what about quartz mining?"

"I think it will play out."

Again she shook her head. "Les Cowan is a mining engineer, and a good one. He didn't go to the cricks. He went up on the ridges and he found the first quartz gold in California. He's got a man working back east, trying to raise capital for a mill to pound quartz down and mine it."

"Will he get the money? Will it pay out?"

"He'll get the money. Look out on the main street. Out there you'll see Turks, you'll see Russians, you'll see see some of Sutter's Kanakas. They've come from all over the earth."

"What are you trying to prove?"

"The Sierra Nevadas have changed. *California—California—* That name is all over the world. *Sutter's creek—Sutter's creek*—It's known in Bombay and Shanghai. We'll never be like we were a year ago, Big John."

His beaten face was solemn. "Eddie, it has to go back. These tents will have to leave; they're bound to. It'll be like when we came—pines and spruce and a wild, open land."

"I don't think so."

She went to her room upstairs and he sat there and gave this deep thought. He had seen this gold rush come and he had hated it and he had hated the men it brought. When they had come to this spot—six years before—it had been a clearing along the Overland Trail, and they had built this trading-post by hand, rolling up the logs and chinking them. Here they had found peace.

Then two years ago Marshall had come into Sutter's room in New Helvetia; he had bolted the door and pulled low the blinds, and he had shown Sutter the nugget. *"It's gold, Sutter! Hear me, it's gold!"*

From then on, the circumstances had violently changed. Men came from lands the average man had never even heard of and they had changed this land. Towns sprang up, mushroom towns; tent towns, log towns—Coulterville, El Dorado, Amador. They each soon had their *Hangman Trees* and each soon had to have vigilante committees. The change had been too sudden, and because of that had to be violent.

For five years, serving drinks and meals to stage-passengers, Big John had lived a peaceful, full life. Then gold had been panned and Rough'n Tough came into being. One night there was only the clearing with their trading post and the next morning there had been tents and camps on the clearing. They had marked out streets and Rough'n Tough was on its way.

George Denham had come in one day and said, "They'll pull you into it, Big John. That's inevitable. I can handle your gaming-tables."

Big John had said, "It'll only run a month or two, anyway. I might just as well make what I can out of them."

Edwina had said, "But it's here forever, Big John. No, not at this wild, mad tempo; but the old days are gone."

He had looked suddenly at her. "I hope you're wrong," he said.

Now he was wondering if her prophecy would prove right. A man, he decided, didn't like change; he liked the old pattern, the old routine, to run on and on, day after day. Placer mining, he knew, was playing out. Therefore some of the miners were getting their pans and equipment and leaving Rough'n Tough. But when young Les Cowan had discovered quartz—Mining engineers were coming in and checking and rechecking, surveying and re-surveying. There would be stamp-mills that broke the night with their clattering plates, there would be the hiss of live steam, the miners going up the hill in the morning, coming down tired at sundown.

He thought, *"We'll stay a few more months, and then—"* If it kept up this pace, they'd leave. They'd sell out and leave.

THE DOOR opened and a girl of about eight came in. "I need a new tablet at school, daddy," she said. "What happened to your face?"

He gave her a quarter.

"They've gone up. They're fifty

cents, now."

He gave her another quarter.

"What happened to your face?"

He said, solemnly, "Your mother hit me."

"Mom did not hit you!"

He said: "Run on to school."

He kept remembering the rise in cost of the tablet in one week. Down the street sugar sold at five dollars a pound, coffee at ten dollars; two days ago the only onion in camp had drawn two hundred dollars. Money was dirt cheap and gold was worthless—yet they grubbed and fought and killed. They violated this good, clean land.

He didn't care what they charged. But it was a symbol to him; it showed him something was wrong, that there was a sickness somewhere on the body worth more than all the gold in California.

He turned in his chair, for there came a low knocking at the rear door. He said, "Come in," and the small man entered. He was a Kanaka, a wiry, thin man of uncertain age, barefooted and wearing blue jeans and an open white shirt that showed his bronzed hairy chest.

"I look for Mister Cowan," he said. "I thought maybe he be in here, Mister Big John."

Big John looked at the clock. "He left about twenty-five minutes ago, Wyto. Didn't you meet him on the road?"

Wyto looked at the clock, too. He frowned, then smiled. "I come in one way; he go home other."

"You working for Les Cowan, now?"

His shoulders shrugged. "Yes, I work for him. I clear land, getting ready for the mill to go up. I quit mining. Find gold, yes—but what good he do me? I spend him. Buy one potatoe, fry for this boy's meal—bingo, day's panning gone. Missus Cowan and me raise potatoes, now."

"You were better off with Sutter."

The head shook vigorously. "No, no, Big John. Me slave with Sutter—he ship me over in boat, me slave. I free now. Better free and without money than be slave and have a dollar.

Big John smiled.

Wyto bowed and backed out the door. Big John put the dust in the poke, added his weights, then put the poke in his safe, the only safe in Rough'n Tough. The Overland Stage had hauled it all the way from St. Louis. Unrest was with the big saloon-man; his face hurt from Elton Gibbs' fists and fingernails. He went through the saloon, nodding at his bartender, and hating the stale smell of beer and whiskey. Outside, the air, although warm, was clean and good. He looked at the pines on the high Sierras to the east and some measure of contentment came to him.

A thick man came up and said, "Big John, the Vigilantes meet at noon, in the same place."

He nodded.

The man continued down the boot-packed earth that made up the sidewalk. Big John felt the resentment return. When he and Edwina had started their trading-post there had been no need of Vigilantes in Rough'n Tough.

Now they were the only law.

3

THEY MET in the cellar under Wayton's General Store. Big John didn't like secret meetings, but realized they were necessary. They were in the minority in a town of toughs. Had these toughs known their identities they would have waylaid them one by one and killed them; they had to keep their membership a secret.

They had already hanged two roughs. They had gotten the evidence they needed, donned masks and gotten their men, and they hanged them. They had left their bodies hanging as a warning to the other killers. Both of the hanged men had jumped mining-claims after killing the original owners.

This was their weekly meeting. Big John took a seat on the corner bench, the candlelight dancing and running across the earth floor and walls, the smell of the earth thick in his nostrils. He nodded to the men

present and they nodded back and he sat down and gave himself to thought, watching the candle flicker and almost die each time the cellar door opened to let in a vigilante and the outside breeze.

Marshal Bright called roll. Each man, instead of having a name, answered by his number; only one was absent. A man said, "Twenty-seven went into Grass Valley today. He'll be back tomorrow, he said."

Bright said, "I see."

Bright ran over a resume of the past week. There had been a few fights and one shooting match—a man had been killed in the gunfight. But he had reached first for his gun, Bright said; therefore the shooting had been in self-defense. The fist fights hadn't amounted to much. Bright looked at Big John.

"I was sleeping this morning when you had trouble with Gibbs and Jose Salinas." He smiled slowly. "I can't stay awake twenty-four hours a day, although I'd like to be able to."

"You didn't miss much."

Bright said, "I disagree with you there. This meeting was held to talk about Elton Gibbs and Jose Salinas. I was down in 'Frisco last week, as you all know. While there I talked with the sheriff and chief-of-police about Gibbs and his friend."

Bright went on, talking slowly, forcefully. Both Gibbs and Salinas had criminal records—jumping mining-claims during the gold rush; before that, stealing cattle and being suspected of stage-and freight-wagon robberies.

"Number 26," Bright said. "You have the floor."

The lawyer got to his feet. He and young Cowan, and the other owners of quartz-claims, were getting up a set of laws to govern quartz-mining, he said. But he was not here to talk about the mining-laws they hoped to have adopted by the legislature of this newly-created state of California.

"One way to stop crime," the lawyer said, "is to watch the persons suspected of being criminals. Therefore, with all sincerity, I ask each and every one of you to keep an eye on Gibbs and Salinas. They are, as you know, ringleaders of the local roughs; if we get them convicted and either hanged or sent to jail, we've broken the back of the local crime element."

A man said, "Does young Cowan realize the danger he is in?"

Big John got the floor. He told about his fight with Gibbs and his talk with the young Cowan.

Somebody said, "I think we should warn Cowan, again." The man looked at Big John. "I move we appoint Big John Matthews to warn Cowan officially."

"But then Cowan would realize Big John is a vigilante," a man said hastily. "Word might get out and the rough element would mark Big John as a danger to them and they might kill him from ambush."

That was true—very true.

Big John Matthews said, "I'll ride out to his place, men."

There was a short silence and then, "We'll back you every inch of the way, Big John."

The meeting broke up. The man left in twos, going up into the store proper, some going out the back-entrance that led in from the alley. Big John sat and talked with the local banker and they were the last two to leave. The saloon-man was tired, he'd been up all night.

HE WENT to his home, got his sorrel and saddled him, and rode toward Les Cowan's claim. Miners were everywhere—on each creek and in every gully. They lived in tents and tepees and lean-tos made of buckbush and trees. A young girl, not more than sixteen or so, sat beside a tree, her baby in her arms. Big John liked her-clean, happy face and he asked, "Where you from?"

"Vermont, sir."

Big John said, "That's a long trek, girl. Where is your husbabd?"

"Down panning in the crick."

The saloon-man rode on, liking the scent of pine and spruce and cedar. He came to a clearing—a mountain park—and a deer, grazing there, leaped in wild alarm, running into the buckbrush and disappearing. This drew a frown to him. Before gold

was discovered, that deer had been tame. Now miners were crawling over the hills like ants on ant-piles and the deer was in danger. Gold had even changed the habitats of the wildings.

Les Cowan had made a log house on his quartz claim. His was the only substantial building in this land of tents and lean-tos. Mrs. Cowan, a pretty, brown-eyes, brown-haired girl of about twenty-four, sat on the porch in the shade, her baby in a cradle beside her. Big John Matthews took off his hat and ran his hand across his damp forehead.

"I'll get you some cool spring-water, Mr. Matthews."

Big John liked the cool, sweet water. "Far better than whiskey or beer," he murmured.

"You never drink, I've heard."

He smiled. "I have to drink water, ma'am."

"I mean liquor."

He looked at her over the dipper, sitting a silent saddle. He thought, "Young Les gets killed and it'll kill her, too." That left him cold inside and vastly uncomfortable. Neither Cowan or his wife were close friends of his and Edwina's. They had visited a little, but that had been all.

He asked, "Where's your husband?" and she said, "Up on the hill. He and Wyto are digging something, as usual."

He turned the sorrel.

She said, "Les wasn't home last night. I got worried and Wyto was worried, and Wyto went in town looking for Les." She watched his swollen face carefully. "Wyto was gone when Les came home. Les was awful quiet."

Big John Matthews listened.

"I asked Wyto where Les had been, and the Kanaka wouldn't tell me. I saw a miner go by a while ago—Joe Hansen, it was—and he told me about the trouble in your saloon, Big John."

Big John mentally damned Joe Hansen.

She said, "I want to thank you for helping Les."

"That was all right." He smiled a little. "I'd do the same thing even for a brother of mine."

But she was deadly serious. "I've tried to talk Les out of playing cards. I haven't been able to. In fact, I've threatened to leave him, take the baby and go—he thinks I don't mean it. I can't stand the anxiety and fear when he's gone all night; I think of a fight, and I can see him killed in some saloon." She was sobbing, now.

Big John's throat was dry. He swallowed.

"What can I do, Mr. Matthews?"

Big John said, "I think he learned a lesson last night. I hope he did. I can keep him from gambling in my place but that would drive him, if he keeps on, into another saloon. I could talk with Jesse Hawkins and Lars Nelson and ask them to keep him away from their tables."

"Will you do that?"

Big John looked up a a snow-capped mountain. The futility of it rose in him and turned him sour against man for the moment. "I'll do that," he assured. "They will co-operate with me, too. He spread his thick hand suggestively. "But there are other games—games held outside of the saloons. He could play at these."

"What can I do?"

"Some men get bitten by the gambling-bug and they never get over it. Some learn their lesson fast and have sense enough to quit. I think Les has quit, that run-in with Elton Gibbs and Jose Salinas this morning scared him. For the first time he saw they wanted to kill him."

"If he doesn't quit," she said, "the baby and I are leaving."

BIG JOHN found the Kanaka, Wyto, and his boss, Les Cowan, working with picks and shovels, digging out a vein of crumbly rock. Wyto was stripped to the waist and barefooted. He showed a wide brown smile. Les Cowan looked up in surprise, sweat dirty on his face.

"Long ride, Big John."

"Not as long as the one you'll take if you tangle with Gibbs and Salinas again. Be careful of your step around here, Cowan."

Cowan's eyes bored into him. "You came out to tell me that, Big John,

I know that already."

"As a representative of the Vigilantes, I rode out here to tell you that if Gibbs and Salinas jump you again, let me know. They're after your claim and you're in their way. But I guess you know that."

"I know that. But we got a marshal in Rough'n Tough. His job is to see us miners gets protection."

Big John shrugged. "That's the Vermont side of you speaking. Bright can't patrol the hills. Last week a miner was killed for his placer claim. We never found his killer; the man got the miner's poke, and decided not to try to keep the claim. Outside of us vigilantes, there's no law here; and, to be truthful, we're damn' little law. Have you registered your claim in Nevada City?"

"Not yet."

"You better get the papers over there."

The Kanaka was listening. "I get to lawyers, Les, and we take the papers there. I do that?"

Cowan said, "We'll do it tomorrow, Wyto."

Big John spoke solemnly. "I'm never one to nose into another man's troubles, Cowan, but your wife brought this up to me. She's sick and she's worried over you. I believe she's got more sense, to put it bluntly, than you have." He held up his hand and silenced the miner. "You're welcome in my Scarlet Flower to drink and visit, but don't play cards there. I'm seeing the other two Rough'n Tough saloons and getting them to bar you from their games, too."

"I'm of age."

"You're a fool," Big John said, bluntly. He leaned on the fork of his saddle. "Your wife'll leave you if you keep gambling and away from home nights. She told me that. You don't believe her; I do."

Cowan searched his face with worried eyes. Then he said, "Thanks, Big John. I'll heed that, friend. I never thought she meant it. You know more about this country than I do. Wyto and I head for town—for Nevada City—this afternoon to get that claim legally recorded."

"You do that," Big John advised.

HE RODE out of the clearing and behind him the Kanaka and Cowan were picking up their shovels and picks, heading toward their camp. He remembered the quartz he'd seen—rich with gold, yellow with gold, colored by gold. Yesterday at Grass Valley, George McKnight had been chasing his cow, who had broken loose from picket. McNight had stumbled over a ledge, just as he was closing in on the rope and, after getting the cow, he had looked at the rock he'd kicked loose. Now the stampede was on. For the rock had been yellow with gold.

Gold, he thought, gold. . . .

He rode back to Rough'n Tough the long way, for he wanted the quiet of the mountains; the streams here, for some mysterious reason, hadn't shown much color. He found himself again thinking of the quiet, slow days when the Overland Stage rolled in, dusty and with tired horses; when teams were changed at his depot and were led into his barn, tugs rattling. And then fresh teams, prancing and gay, were led out, backed into place, and hooked up.

Then the stage, passengers fed and rested momentarily, would rock out, the fresh broncs against their collars. It would dip down the pine-rimmed road, dust rising behind it, and it would rock into the hollow and top the next hill, with them watcing it—Edwina, Martha, and himself. There the driver, as a last salutation, would lift his whip to them before the hill rose and claimed stage, passengers, and teams.

There would be only the sounds of the invisible stage, moving down into the Sacramento Valley, and then these would die, and always then he had a great sense of loneliness, of empty spaces without sound. They would stand there, the three of them, and he would suddenly feel small and lonesome against the great rim of the mountains; this would then leave, and contentment would fill him as he and Edwina and their daughter would turn back into the depot, for there was work to do—dishes to wash from the meals, the floor to be swept

and perhaps scrubbed. Yes, and he'd curry down the tired stage-teams, stuff their mangers with good wild mountain hay, and he'd work and find satisfaction in his work.

Did he find satisfaction in the Scarlet Flower?

No, he didn't. He was making more money than he'd ever made before, or even had ever dreamed of earning. Yet he wasn't content: he wasn't even happy. He thought, "I'll get rid of the Scarlet Flower. I'll sell it out."

But where would he and Edwina and Martha go? The entire Sierra Nevadas, from the Oregon Line to San Bernardino, was dotted with miners' shacks and miners' tents; miners were black flies, small and quick-moving, preying off this once silent empire of peaks and pines.

Edwina had said, "There is no place to go, Big John."

He had nodded. "The mountains are full of people."

"The big mistake," she had said, "was when we changed our trading post into a saloon. When placer gold plays out there'll be quartz mills, and the town will be steady and there'll be peace and at night people won't prowl the streets like wild animals."

"But when will placer pay out?"

"They'll leave soon. There'll come news of a richer strike and some morning they'll be all gone."

He was riding through the canyon, going along the sand-wash bed, with huge rocks on each side. Something smashed across his head from behind. He got the impression, quick and sure, that some man was standing behind a huge sandstone, and that man had swung a club on him. He remembered reaching for his gun. He remembered the dull, far-away blast of his .45. The bullet, he reasoned, would plow harmlessly into the ground. Then all was dark. Dimly, he remembered falling.

4

HIS FACE and his shirt were wet. He sat up and looked at George Denham; the gambler squatted beside him and he had his back to a big rock.

Denham asked; "Are you all right, Big John?"

Big John Matthews ran his hand up to his hair and when he took it down, he saw blood on his fingers. "What happened?"

"Somebody slugged you."

Big John remembered then. They were beside a spring and Denham had a tin cup; he got some cool water and it tasted good to Big John. "I was riding along, doing some thinking, and something bashed me across the head. I remember pulling my gun, and firing once wild."

"I heard that shot. Who jumped you?"

"I don't know; I couldn't see whoever it was. They struck from behind and hit hard and fast. What are you doing here?"

George Denham told him Edwina had been worried, him riding out on the mountains alone, after the trouble with Gibbs and Salinas. She had awakened him and he'd headed for Les Cowan's, only to find out he had already left. "So I rode this way, seeing I didn't meet you on the main trail."

"How long was I out?"

"About five minutes, I guess."

Big John asked, "Did you see who slugged me?"

George Denham shook his head. "I didn't. They must've heard me coming, and they rode pell-mell up the canyon, I'd say. I saw sign that looked like two horses had been tied back yonder."

"Elton Gibbs," murmured Big John Matthews. "And Jose Salinas, too."

George Denham shrugged.

Big John dug into his pockets, found nothing missing; he still had his money-belt, too. "What in the hell did they want?" He got to his feet and stood looking at George Denham.

"What do you suppose they wanted, Big John?"

"They wanted to kill me. They heard you coming and they rode off."

Denham nodded. "That's the way it looks to me, too. When you crossed them this morning, they marked you

in their book." He pulled on his cigaret and his eyes drew down a little.

"Nothing to turn over to the vigilantes," Big John said. "We have no direct evidence." He felt of his head again. The blood was matted. "Eddie will see that. She'll ask questions."

"Eddie," George Denham said, "is deadly afraid, Big John."

Big John thought, "The Gods smiled the day Edwina was born, and they smiled on me." Someday she would be old and thin and gray, and yet the Gods would still smile on him, for she was his wife. This thought was warm and bright and yet, strangely disturbing; she was afraid he would get killed.

HE GOT his horse and went up, a little stiff from the saddle, a trifle sore from his slugging. He and Denham rode down the canyon with Denham silent, rolling cigaret after cigaret.

Finally Denham said; "Young Cowan, I understand, has registered his claim with the assayer in town, but he hasn't filed on it in the county office in Nevada City, has he?"

"How did you know?"

"I talked with him last night." Denham ground his cigaret dead against his saddle-fork.

"He's going to file it this afternoon."

Denham said, "Oh."

They rode again, only sound their horses' hoofs on sand. Now and then a horse snorted and tossed his head, fighting nose-flies. Then Big John Matthews asked, "I wonder who else knows?"

"I was thinking of that." Denham reined in. "They might jump him on his claim. They might kill him and his wife and the kid and put out their own stakes. That has been done, you know."

"Man, what a country; Lord, how it's gone down since gold came." Big John swore softly and Denham realized it was the first time he'd heard the big man curse. "There comes Les Cowan now, and the Kanaka is with him."

They were on the ridge over Rough'n Tough town. Below them their trail twisted through rocks and crossed shale, going into the creek. To the east was the trail that led past Cowan's claim and on this they saw the two riders, still two miles or so beyond the town.

"They're all right, then," George Denham said.

They reached town and left their broncs in front of the Scarlet Flower. The place was packed with miners, drinking and gambling, and the air was thick with cigar-and cigaret-smoke. Big John tied his horse, listening to the sounds inside. He heard, "Hardscrabble Crick... Gold to the roots of the mountain grass... There's a new strike north--rich strike..."

"This part of the world," he told George Denham, "is mad."

Denham said, "I like it that way. It's been that way all my life. It was that way in South Africa and in Argentina. I follow madness, Big John. I'm a gambler, you know, and I shift with the gold,"

"You'll leave, then?"

"When gold plays out, yes."

Denham went into the saloon and Big John went to Marshal Bright, who stood on the corner with his cigar. He told about his ride out to Les Cowan's claim and his being slugged and that Cowan was going to register his claim. He asked about Elton Gibbs and Jose Salinas. "Have you seen them recently?"

"They're not in town."

Big John said, suddenly, "Get a man out to Mrs. Cowan. Do it right now, Bright. Get him armed and out there."

Bright said, "All right." He nodded and a man crossed the street, gun-harness creaking. Bright said, "Ike, head for Cowan's. Watch out there. I'll either ride out to relieve you or send a man out."

Ike's eyes were dull gray. "You expect trouble, Bright?"

"The wind is blowing," Bright said. "An' no man knows where it will hit next, or when it will shift."

Ike left, gun-harness making small sounds.

Big John said, suddenly, "If you see El Gibbs and Jose Salinas, let them know that Les Cowan and Wyto are going to Nevada City to record their claim."

"You talk crazy, Big John."

"Not too crazy," the saloon-man returned.

He went into his saloon, jostling through the crowd. A drunken miner got hold of him and tried to get him to the bar. He had come from the outside and its sweet, pine-scented air and here the air was stale and rotten. He pushed the miner roughly against the bar, placing his hand against the man's wide chest. The miner said shortly, "You lookin' for trouble with me?"

"I don't drink."

BIG JOHN went on and the miner shrugged. He went into the back-room and Eddie was sitting behind his desk. He kept his hat on to hide the marks of the slugging. He said, "I met George Denham." He kissed her. "Your old man got home all right."

She said, "I worry like an old spinster, I guess."

"Lots of men outside." He jerked his thumb toward the din beyond the closed door. "You lose me and you have one of those."

"Thanks."

George Denham came in. He poured from a flask into a glass. He held up the clear whiskey. "Outside the rabble; inside, swift thoughts." He smiled and drank. He was a riddle and a secret.

Edwina said, "Martha should be home by now. I'd better get home and make her some lunch."

After she had gone George Denham said, "Well, Big John, have you made up your mind?"

Big John told about his talk with Marshal Bright. Denham nodded, eyes bright, and he kept looking at his glass, turning it a little so the whiskey reflected facets of golden light. He said, "I'll watch for Elton Gibbs and Jose Salinas."

He left by the rear door.

Big John sat behind his desk, waiting. A few minutes later, Les Cowan came in from the saloon, with Wyto following him. The Kanaka had on a pair of shoes now. "I'm all dressed up." He showed white teeth and he tugged up his sagging trousers by the piece of rope used as a belt.

Cowan said, "We were down to see the assayer. He got the papers ready for us, Big John. Now we need the signature of one witness, and I thought you'd sign for him."

Big John signed.

"I wasn't happy about leaving Mrs. Cowan home alone," the young miner said. "I talked with Marshal Bright and he told me you'd had him send a man out to watch the claim. I want to thank you for that."

"No thanks," Big John said gruffly.

Cowan and Wyto started for the door. Big John said, "Go out the back and you won't have to fight the mob. You're going to Nevada City with that paper, now?"

Cowan said, "We leave right away. Back east a mining claim needs only be registered with an essayer. I'd've had this filed before, but I figured mining laws were more or less the same, all over the country."

"You're not in the East now." Big John's voice was rough.

Cowan said, "Don't get huffy about it."

Big John did not answer. He went to work on a paper on his desk. Wyto and Cowan left. Big John pushed back the paper. He went back through the saloon and went outside, the clean air hitting him. George Denham's bronc was gone. He was untying his own saddler from the rack when Les Cowan left town. They rode mules, for they used the mules for moving dirt out at their claim.

They rode toward the Nevada City trail. This ran along the meadow, heading across Grass Valley and into Nevada City, some five miles beyond Grass Valley. The county-seat was about ten miles to the east.

BIG JOHN went up and rode to the edge of Rough'n Tough. Finally George Denham rode out of the

buckbrush. Denham said, "El Gibbs and Jose Salinas never rode into town. They were on the ridge, watching Cowan and Wyto."

"Where now?"

Denham moved in saddle and jabbed his cigar toward the ridge. "Up there. They're watching the trail to Nevada City. When they saw Cowan go into the assayer's office, and then into your saloon—they knew what was up, then. They want those filing papers. They get those and legally they own Cowan's claim."

"We can swing around the mountain," Big John said.

He took the way himself, for this country was familiar to him. Many the time he'd stalked deer here, before this mad, gold-dry bunch had run the deer out, or killed them. He was big in his stirrups, pushing ahead of the gambler, who rode and nursed his cigar and his thoughts. They came to a park and Denham pushed his bronc up and he said, "You know, Big John, this isn't your business, and it isn't mine."

"They slugged me."

Denham shook his head. "That you don't know for sure. There are other thieves and thugs around here. A dead bronc's carrion draws a lot of flies, you know."

"It was them."

Denham let his horse lose a pace, for Big John was entering the thick brush. Now and then he used his quirt to keep his horse close to the saloon-man's. He kept his cigar and his thoughts, after that.

They skirted a gorge, with pine and spruce below them,-spiking their way upward out of shale and rock. Big John's horse loosened a pebble that slid off into space. They came down the slope, horses sliding in shale.

This was a wilder country and here, according to prospectors, there was little gold, and no tents or lean-tos sprouted here. Big John glanced at the sun and saw it was getting low and judged they had ridden far enough, and they had ridden hard enough. So he turned toward the trail and found it ten minutes later.

Denham said, "Where would they be?"

"I'd pick Round Rock point."

Denham lit his cigar. "How far?"

"A mile, I'd say."

Denham went down ad lifted his rifle out of saddle-boot. Big John had his rifle, too. Denham eased his lever down and saw the rim of the bullet in the barrel; he snapped it closed. "George Denham," he murmured, "playing Don Quixote. What they wouldn't say if they knew this in Capetown."

They went down a small trail, put into the rush by the hoofs of deer going to drink, and by the pads of timber-wolves and lobos, by the tiny paws of cottontails and brush rabbits. Big John ahead and Denham followed. They came to Round Rock point, and they got up higher, and studied the ground with its pines and spruce and occasional live-oaks.

"They'll be along soon," George Denham said. "We got to find Gibbs and Salinas before that."

Big John asked, "Can you see them down there, George?"

They both looked closely. Minutes ran by and shadows gathered. Finally Big John said, "They're not there, George." He looked toward the west. "I wonder if I guessed wrong. They've been b e l o w, and they might've hit Cowan and the Kanaka by now—"

"You guessed right," a voice said, from behind.

They turned and watched Elton Gibbs come out of the rush. He had a rifle on them; his face showed the pounding of Big John's fist. Gibbs said, "Salinas, keep your rifle on them, savvy."

From the deep brush, he heard a hidden man's voice. "I'm no fool, Gibbs." Then, "My rifle covers them."

Denham glanced at Big John. He said, around his cigar, "I marked the spot where he is, Big John." Denham was very cold. He was a glacier. He was without thoughts, w i t h o u t warmth.

Big John nodded, trying to keep his fear down. He had not been

schooled in the gambler's school, and he knew his face showed his emotion. He said, "What do you aim to do, Gibbs?"

"Kill you."

Denham said, cynically, "Why, I never knew that! You're layin' lies into us, aren't you?"

Gibbs studied him. "Big John is a tall man with the vigilantes. It's either him or us, and seeing you're along, you can go with him."

Denham said, "That's nice. You got a rifle on us and a partner in the brush. You give a man a chance."

"Would you give me a chance?"

"You're a skunk, a skunk with hydrophobia. You want to rob and kill because you're too lazy to work and you haven't got brains enough to make a living without working. So you rob and kill."

GIBBS MOVED forward, anger scrawled across him. Big John saw then through Denham's plan. Gibbs was in reach and Big John went in, rifle raised. He brought it down and Gibbs whirled and the rifle barrel hit him on the shoulder and knocked him down. Big John said quickly, "I'll get Gibbs."

Denham was on one knee, rifle putting bullets into the brush. Big John had Gibbs' rifle and he threw it aside and he dropped his own. They rolled over and fought and he saw Denham run into the brush, and he heard two more shots. He put his knee against Gibbs' belly and hit and Gibbs broke loose. He got up and ran and Big John sent him down again.

Denham came out of somewhere and said, "I killed Salinas, Big John."

Big John had no answer. Gibbs was fighting him and he was fighting for his life, and Big John was fighting for his. This went on, the minutes long and terrible, and finally Gibbs was down on his belly, and Denham was slapping Big John across the face.

"Don't, Big John."

Big John got up. He was trembling and cold. He said, "He'll get to his feet in a little while."

Denham lit his cigar. "Not him," "He'll never get up." He smiled a little over the flame. "I heard his neck pop."

Big John Matthews was weak, yet he kept standing up.

"You should have done that this morning," George Denham said slowly. "I guess Edwina shouldn't have gotten you off him. A fight is a funny thing. Once started, it has to come to a definite conclusion. Well, this one is ended."

Big John sat on a boulder. "Are you hurt?"

"Salinas, my friend, made an error; he got excited. As a result his bullets went wild and mine, once I got a sight of him, ran true."

They stood silent, both breathing heavily, and Big John Matthews put his head in his hands. "I'll get Eddie and Martha and go.

"You couldn't do that, Big John."

"Why not?"

"This is *your* country. You'd leave and when morning came you'd walk outside and look for those mountains, and they wouldn't be there. You couldn't live without them watching you."

Big John looked up. "You see things, George."

Denham shrugged.

Big John spoke as though talking to himself. "No, I couldn't leave; neither could Eddie. They'll move soon and things will get somewhere back to their old state. No, I'll have to stay."

"Here comes Cowan and Wyto," George Denham said.

The two mules came trotting, their riders braced against saddles, and they passed about fifty feet away, then disappeared in the dip downward.

Big John Matthews was thinking of Edwina and Martha, and he was remembering Mrs. Cowan's brown eyes and brown hair. He was feeling the unrest and the driving uneasiness slowly leave him.

Finally he said, "We'd best ride back to town, George."

THE END

BONANZA IN LEAD

Complete Novelet

By James Blish

Brant Ballinger had a couple of things to do before he died, and one of them was to find the son who had dry-gulched his partner. And Ballinger knew that this snake might turn out to be his partner's son, the long-riding kid whose interests Brant had promised to protect!

1

WHEN OLD Mitchell made camp five miles south of Deadwood, there was some roddies in town thought it was all mighty funny. Me, I been around in Dakota country since '48, and I guess if I stay long enough I kin even see the day they make it a Territory. But I don't guess I'll ever see what the joke was on "Lead" Mitchell.

Mebbe I sprained my funny-bone diggin' for Californy ore, or else it's thet they'd laugh at a hangin' in

The riders took some pot-shots at Ballinger as he approached.

Deadwood. But it didn't look so comical to me: old Tom Mitchell had wore out his back an' his arms, lost all his stake, an' broke his heart plumb to pebbles in Calaveras County. He couldn't get no farther than a few miles acrost the east border of Wyomin' on what he had left, an' that no-'count son of his warn't minded to lend any hand.

Young Tommy, he goes right on into Deadwood, him havin' a fair hand with cards an' no disposition for workin'; Old Tom squats down right where he is an' stakes a claim, with me—Brant Ballinger—sort of holdin' the pegs for him while he swats 'em. Old Tom figgers he's got no call to go on East, what with no more family, money, or prospects, so he claims this little parcel of dirt, an' him an' me put up a cabin.

Now the country around Deadwood ain't exactly badlands, but it's in the upper arm of the Black Hills, an' nobody'd ever heard of anythin' comin' out of the ground thereabouts but gophers. Farther south, there was a couple of lead mines, so the smart folks right away take to callin' Old Tom "Lead" Mitchell, an' slappin' their knees like they'd said somethin' right-down comical.

Every so often a miner went

through Deadwood goin' East with gold dust practically leakin' out his ears, but mostly the travel was the other way—in California every last man jack was gettin' rich at top speed, an' Deadwood sat right across the northwest trail, sellin' supplies to them as was bound to join the rush, an' cheatin' them as was comin' back with the yellow stuff. Young Tommy was right in there cheatin' with the best; an' five miles south, his pa an' me panned the little stream nobody'd got around to namin', an' ate what we could shoot or grow—jackrabbits an' spuds mostly.

"You pull on outa here," Old Tom told me. "You got no call to sit here an' starve, just on account of I pulled you outa a river you coulda swum anyhow."

"I ain't pullin', an' that there is final," I said. "You're poorly, Tom, an' you know it. If'n I left, you couldn't work the claim an' keep yourself fed at the same time. You got to have a workhand."

He wrinkled up his big white moustaches an' spat at a prairie-dog hill. "I'm jes workin' that claim fer somethin' to'do. There ain't nothin' in it fer you, exceptin' you'll get rid down or drygulched by Jess Kibby."

I guess every town in the West has at least one Jess Kibby. Put ten men down in the middle of a desert, give 'em all an acre of sand apiece, an' sooner or later one of 'em is goin' to turn land-hog.

"Kibby don't scare me none," I said. "I ain't young, but if'n I c'n still hit a jackrabbit, I c'n hit a gunmen perched up on a hoss." I got up off the stoop an' went over to where my own sorrel mare was tethered. "I'm a-goin' in town for flour an' mebbe see Tommy, too. I didn't get much out of California, but it'll carry us a while. An' if'n you think there's gold in there crick, I'll take the chance."

"You ain't got much sense," Old Tom said, but the look in his black eyes made me feel right good.

I DIDN'T get more'n two feet into Deadwood when I seen Tommy. He was out in front of the Halfway Entertainment & Refreshment Emporium, which is what Kibby called his headquarters for raw deals an' whiskey likewise. Tommy an' a couple of Kibby's shady sidekicks was pitchin' silver dollars at a sombrero.

"Howdy, Tommy," I said, gettin' down off'n Susy an' hitchin' her to the rail. "Last time I seen you, you didn't have a copper to give the old man. Looks like you ain't sufferin' none these days."

"I do all right," Tommy said, scowling. He was blond—like his ma, Old Tom said—but he had the Mitchell look. Sorta watered-like, if'n you see what I mean: same face, only not much in it. "Found any lead yet?"

"We ain't interested in lead," I said, pickin' up my empty saddle-bag. "The way you grinnin' jackanapes carry on of Satiddys, we could dig all we needed out'n the boards hereabouts."

"I reckon Kibby is savin' a slug or two," one of the gunslingers said, droppin' another cartwheel into the hat. I turned my back on him an' went on up to the feed-an'-four store, but I didn't like the sound of it, Mebbe Kibby *was* about ready to give over tryin' to just scare Old Tom off'n his stake. I didn't stand to lose much—I still had enough to git back East in a pinch, though it wasn't exackly gettin' any bigger—but it riled me to see that human rattler mockin' Old Tom with one hand an' drivin' him off his "wuthless" claim with the other.

"Gimmy a sack of flour," I told Tanner. "An' a few shells, too."

"Snakes?" Tanner said.

"You can't never tell. I aim to be prepared." I counted out the coins.

"Never heard tell of huntin' snakes with a scattergun."

"Some kinds," I said, "are scareder of gittin' hurt than of bein' blotted out quick-like."

A shadow come acrost the floor from the door an' I spun around fast. I was gettin' jumpy in my old age, but I guess I had my reasons. It was Jess Kibby, lookin' as if he was a mite startled to see me.

"Well, if it isn't the lead miner," he said. "Hello, Ballinger. I'm surprised that you're still around these

parts." He was like that; must of had an eddication somewheres an' gone wrong later. A handsome feller, too, with a white hat an' white leather boots, an' his clothes allus new-lookin'.

"You don't look like the surprise pleasures you none," I said. "Shore, I'm still here, an' so's Old Tom. We like it here. Mebbe we might even make some money."

Kibby walked past me to the counter an' pulled out his wallet, like what we do ain't no concern of his. "I wish you luck, Ballinger. I've heard of men dying of lead-poisoning. It takes time to build up, of course, so only stubborn men stick it out to the bitter end."

I had my face all fixed to sass him back again when a passel of riders went by outside; they were powerful noisy an' by the time they'd gone away I'd changed my mind. I had no call to bandy brags with him. "The bitter end—" hellsfire, I'd hit that there already. He left a taste in my mouth bitter as alkali dust.

I h'isted my saddle-bag an' went outside an' hung it on Susy, slingin' the shotgun on t'other side. Young Tommy an' his cronies was gone, which suited me fine.

ON THE RIDE back I took it easy an' made my brains put in a lick of hard rasslin'. There warn't no gold comin' outa that crick—not today, nor t'morra, nor next year, neither. It was just a crick, waterin' pretty fair soil for spuds. If'n Old Tom still wanted dust, we could go back to Californy—there didn't seem to be no shortage there, even if Tom hadn't been fixed to stick there long enough.

After all, I'd gone an' made *my* strike. I'd been six kinds of damn fool to trail the old guy back here, where there wasn't even no Territory an' the nearest town large enough to have a lawman was Fort Pierre, some two hundred miles of Cheyenne country. It griped me some when I came to think of it. Old Tom had pulled me out of the Little Bear rapids; so I'd pulled an' shoved him acrost the Wasatch range, put him on my horse when his gave out in Wyomin', helped him stake out when Tommy left him south of Deadwood—not that Tommy'd been of much use even that far—an' used up most of my strike keepin' him goin' on the Coteau des Prairies.

An' what for? Because a sick old bird, who'd gone bróke in a country where every man jack was takin' a fortune right out'n the ground, had said, "That there's gold-bearin' gangue," and plunked hisself down to prospect a crick a grasshopper could of spat over.

It didn't make sense, that's all. No homesteadin' wasn't so risky. He hadn't nothin' to lose, an' if we left right now I'd still have enough dust to buy the land from the gov'ment. If we stayed, we'd git lead aplenty—right where it counted. No, sir!

Oncet I had my mind all made up, I begun to feel halfway better. Even a rattle of gunfire from away back in the town didn't upset me none—hellsfire, let 'em shoot each other up if'n they wanted to. We was leavin'. It was beginnin' to get dark, an' about a half mile away from the crick the trail went through a big field of pasque flowers, like a great big polka-dot quilt my grandma had oncet. Ev'rythin' looked right pretty to me.

Then I heard the gunfire again, an' it wasn't no farther away, like it ought to of been. It was a right smart bit closer, an' I saw a muzzle-flash against the hills right in front of me. A second after the flash, I heard a big *blam!*

I SPURRED SUSY an' took off. That was Tom's old smoothbore—I hadn't never heard it fired, but I'd heard plenty like it. 'Peared like Jess Kibby wasn't agoin' to give us time to quit the claim.

Susy warn't so young, but she could run if'n she was urged some. I hung onto the reins with one hand an' unhooked the scattergun from the pommel with the other. I didn't hear the smoothbore again, but there was a lot of other racket up ahead.

When I think back on it now, I can recollect thinkin' how it was too bad the way I was tramplin' the pasque flowers. A man's mind works

funny sometimes. The next thing I bring to mind is bearin' down on a group of riders. I had my mouth open an' I reckon I was yellin' my fool head off.

Some ranny took a shot at me, but I must of took 'em pretty much by surprise. I gave Susy her head an' let fly with the shotgun, first one barrel, then t'other. It made a right loud noise, an' one of their horses r'ared up an' run away. The rest of 'em fanned out.

It was too dark by now to see any faces. I pulled up beside the cabin, fell off Susy an' gave her a healthy swat. She whinnied an' cantered away. If there was goin' t'be shootin' I didn't want her hit; it warn't none of it her fault.

But there wasn't no more shootin'. I was flat on my belly, tryin' to jam another brace of shells into the shotgun, when I heard hoofs clatterin' uptrail. As far as I could tell, most of 'em went toward Deadwood, though some scattered away south an' east.

I lay right where I was, makin' sure they hadn't left no tail-man to gun me from the brush, until it was pitch-dark. After a while, over the wind, I heard a noise, like a coyote pup whimperin'. (That there was great country for coyotes, let me tell you!) I perked up my ears and lifted my head a bit.

"Brant. . .Brant. . ."

I got up, careful-like. The call come again, from over near the crick. It was Old Tom, right enough. He was all sprawled out, with his feet toward me an' his frame twisted. His head was on the down-slope toward the water.

I took off my old fringed doeskin shirt that I'd wore to town for dress-up, an' bunched it under his head. My hand come away wet and sticky.

"Brant. . ."

"Easy, Tom. Who done it?"

"Don't. . .know." He gasped all of a sudden, like somethin' hurt him real bad. "Come from town—caught me—workin' the crick—"

I had a mind to leave a minute and get some things to fix him up from the cabin, but I could hear by his breathin' it warn't no use. "I'll get 'em," I said. "Don't you worry, Tom."

"The claim—half yours—half to the younker, if'n he straightens out . . . . .Watch him fer me, Brant."

"I'll watch him," I said, a bit harder than I'd meant to. Then I shut up. No sense tellin' a dyin' man his own son might of done him in.

But Old Tom ws sharp enough to catch it. "He's not that bad," he panted. "Needs a good hand. Plenty here for him if'n he—if'n he—"

He knotted up, all of a sudden. It was an awful sound that he made. Then I was all by myself, out there by the pasque-flower field; me an' the flowers and the crick, and a big, empty sky.

I guess I went a little loco then. I stood up an' my face an' ears an' the palms of my hands burned like brimstone, an' sweat run down all over me. The alkali dust was in my mouth again, an' mebbe I cried, too. If'n I did, I don't apologize. Most of all, I hated—hated the low-domed hills, an' the smell of the plants, an' the gold-fever, an' all them stars watchin' so nosey-like an' not carin' a damn, not one single damn.

I could of been there a good hour, or mebbe only a minute or so. It don't matter none. Somewhere in there I began thinkin' about me again. I had no ties now. I could take there I begun thinkin' about me what I had left of my dust an' go on East—to Fort Pierre or farther on. I could buy land an' forget the Coteau des Prairies, an' let Tommy Mitchell wind up at the wrong end of a rope.

Anyhow, I'd have to hide out a while. I knew a place over near the Tetons that'd make a passable hole. Then I'd fix young Tommy's wagon, and Jess Kibby's, too. The homesteadin' could wait.

I started toward the cabin to get a shovel to bury Old Tom, an' my boot hit somethin' that clunked like an old tin dipper. I got a couple of lucifers out'n my saddle-bag and struck one.

It was our beat-up pan. There was some water in it, and a slant of white quartz sand. I looked at it, an' that alkali taste was so strong I was

right close to bein' sick. The match started to sputter.

Just before it went out, I seen somethin' else. When I struck the next little stick of sulphur, my hand was a-tremblin' like I had the chills. I looked close.

There was little specks of shiny yellow in the gangue.

2

IT WAS along towards mornin' when I saddled up Susy again, and it gave me a funny feelin'. You know how it is, when it's just before you see the sky begin to lighten up a bit, an' everythin's quiet. Makes a man feel right odd. The little old cabin still had a lot of stuff in it—I packed only the things I figgered I'd need most—but it sure *looked* empty.

I started off towards the Tetons 'thout lookin' back. Kibby'd be down on that claim 'fore long, but it belonged to the old man under the mound. The cabin had been pretty well upset; they must of broke in while the rest of 'em kept Old Tom busy by the crick. They'd took his strong-box, where I knew the deed was, an' prob'ly papers showin' what he wanted done with the claim if'n he was gunned or died nat'ral; but he was right there, on the land, and it was his'n no matter how many rattlesnakes went over it—his'n an' mine, an' mebbe part Tommy's.

I stayed in the Tetons a good long time, an' I don't like to think about it much. It was the hardest on Susy, but I didn't enjoy it none; it got cold, an' the eatin' warn't so good some months. When it got real bad, I made forays, and hooked stuff from settlements when I could.

The third or fourth time I was down I seen somethin' that gave me a lot to think about in my little old cave. There was a settlement of some sort a-growin' up around the claim. I didn't mess with it none, seein' as how I was pretty sure Kibby was around an' about it most of the time, but I did plenty of snoopin'.

It didn't look like a rush town. I'd seen plenty of them. They grow up in a couple of nights, an' there's plenty of shootin' an' carryin' on. This here little place was slow to grow, an' right orderly. I reckoned Kibby was keepin' the strike to hisself, if'n he knew about it at all. But sure, he knew about it. He must of k n o w n—o t h e r w i s e, why had he wanted the claim first off?

Either Kibby'd destroyed the papers, or he had 'em in a safe somewheres—mebbe in the Halfway office. Most likely, he'd burnt 'em. They wouldn't of done him no good, and there'd allus be the chance I'd get 'em back.

When I went back down, durin' the spring thaw, not even Susy was right sure she knew me. I had a beard a mile long, and summat whiter than my old short 'un had been; my hair was all scraggly, with honest-to-gosh ringlets in it, 'stead of the nest bowl trim I'd had before; an' my clothes was wore to ribbons. I was plumb ashamed of myself, sort of.

"What town's this here?" I asked a waddie just outside.

"Lead," he said. I thought about that a minute, an' I still didn't see the joke.

"They got lead mines here?"

"Naw," he said, lookin' me up an' down like I was a tramp, which I was, "Named after an old coot had a claim hereabouts. Folks say his podner gunned him, thinkin' he'd struck gold. Jess Kibby—that's the mayor of Deadwood, up north a ways—named it. A remembrance, like."

I thanked him civil, and pushed on in. I should of knowed I couldn't win. If'n I'd strayed, Jess would of gunned *me;* when I cut an' run, he got all the chance in the world to pin the killin' on me. It'd be right smart to clear out, afore some one of Kibby's hired killers saw behint my beard an' my rags.

But I've allus been a stubborn cuss. I'd made a promise to watch over young Tommy. Before I left this country, I was either goin' to straighten him up or lay him out—all dependin' on whether or not I could find out who done his pa in. An' besides, there was gold here, an' part of it was mine.

I RECKON KIBBY must of been a mighty puzzled man. He knew about that there gold, that was for certain. I'll bet he was a-wonderin' where it'd all got to. I'd wondered myself, up there in the Tetons, but the answer was easy oncet you looked in the right place.

The hull question was—had Old Tom knowed, too? If'n he had, he'd of writ it down for the younker, an' Kibby'd have the answer an' burned the papers. If'n he hadn't, Kibby'd of kept the papers, lookin' for a code or map in secret ink or some such foolishness.

An' if Kibby still had the papers—how was I to get 'em?

That was a real hard one, an' I gave over on it for a while an' moseyed into the general store. I put out dust for what I needed.

"Californy?" the storekeeper said. Mac Tanner didn't look no different behind a new counter, but he sure enough didn't know me from Adam's off ox.

"You guessed it."

"Looks like a rough trip."

"I ain't complainin' none. Got a safe?"

"Shore. You aimin' to store yer strike here? Ain't you a-goin' to need it?"

"Nope," I said, shakin' my head. The ringlets felt funny. "I ain't a drinkin' man. You c'n put it here an' I'll draw on it when I need supplies."

Tanner looked at me like I was six different kinds of fool, but I knowed what I was doin'. I meant ever'body to know there was a greenie on the loose, a shaggy old grubber that'd put his dust in Mac Tanner's keepin' an' expect to get honest reckonin'.

It worked, too. I'd figgered on goin' to Deadwood to put up at the old Fleabite Hotel, since there warn't no lodgin' in Lead; but I didn't even make it out'n the new town afore a big hard-lookin', clean-shaved feller in a string tie pulled his hoss up beside Susy.

"New here, Pop?" he said.

"Brand spandy new," I agreed, scratchin' casual-like under my tatters.

"Kibby likes to be hospitable to strangers. If yer in no hurry—"

He was polite enough, but he didn't sound like I'd be smart to be in no hurry. I said, "I don't mind."

I didn't neither. I was on my way to a bonanza—or a gallows-tree.

KIBBY'S OFFICE was upstairs over the Halfway, like always, an' I looked around it right close. It hadn't changed none as far as I could see: a big desk, big enough to run a country from; an old burn-spotted leather chair; a swivel chair; a door leadin' back to a storeroom or maybe livin' quarters—on'y Kibby's henchmen knew exactly what—an' a safe, big but none too strong-lookin'.

I sat down in the chair 'thout bein' told an' the big galoot that'd brung me glared like I was committin' some crime. I remembered that Kibby liked to have people stand around uncomfortable like soldiers when he was talkin' to 'em, but my knees was none too springy after the winter I'd put in.

I'd just about got settled when the inside door bunged open an' Kibby come in. With him was young Tommy. The boy's expression was a good bit harder'n it had been, an' he'd developed quite a swagger; I guessed Kibby'd made him a lieutenant in his little set-up.

"What's your name, Pop?" Kibby asked sudden-like, sittin' down an' starin' at me. I hoped my disguise was all right, an' that Kibby had no memory for voices. I had me a handsome cold, which might of helped.

"Folks call me Dusty," I said, which warn't no lie in Californy, anyhow.

"Hmm. Dirty'd be more like it. Where'd you get the gold?"

"Out'n the Comstock Lode, if'n it's any of your business."

"Watch yer mouth, Pop," young Tommy said. "If them teeth are yourn, you ain't a-goin' to keep 'em long at thet rate."

Kibby lifted one hand an' sort of shushed him. "I'm sure Dusty doesn't realize what the situation is," he said, real smooth. "The fact of the matter, Dusty, is that prospecting around these parts is run by a closed corporation, of which I have the hon-

or to be president. When a new man comes to town with a stake, we like to be sure it didn't come from our property."

"If'n it did, you've got long arms," I said. "I ain't never heard of no gold in these parts. I ain't heard of no corporations in unorganized territory, neither, but I'll take your word for it. I panned that there gold fair an' square in the High Sierras nigh onto two years ago; it's mine."

Tommy was lookin' at me real intent, but a little puzzled, too. It gave me the williwams—not on'y because I was feared of bein' found out, but because of that Mitchell face: like Old Tom again, but with all the kindness let out, an' somethin' put in round the mouth that made you think of kicked cats an' whupped kids.

"I don't doubt that it's yours," Kibby was sayin'. "We asked only for your own protection; when big sums of money move suddenly around here, they're likely to lose their owners."

"You mean I can't take my dust outa here if'n I want?"

"Why, yes; not all at once, that's all. I've had it transferred to our company bank—after all, a store safe isn't a very secure place for it—and you can take out enough for your needs whenever you like."

"I don't like it," I said. "I'll have to buy more stuff than I c'n pack away with me, an' have no money to buy on the trail."

"You can take a hundred dollars worth with you. That's plenty of money for travelling in these parts." Kibby shrugged. "As for how you pack off what you buy—that's your worry."

"You can use a caboose," young Tommy said.

BELIEVE ME, I really thunk that one out hard. He was still watchin' me like a sparrow-hawk. For the life of me I couldn't see no harm in the question. A *kabuis* is a thing all the Plains Indians uses; two poles is tied to the saddle at one end an' trailed behind a hoss on t'other; you tie a heavy pack acrost the trailin' end, an' it lets you pull more load than you c'n put on the animal's back. It's a Dutch word, I reckon; leastways the Mohicans carts baggage like that.

"That'd help," I said finally. "But I'd still have to leave more'n half of it here."

"Only one hoss?"

Well, I'd put my boot in it, all right. But I'd as good as admitted it; two hosses could of pulled a wagon, an' I'd of had no need for a *kabuis*. "That's keerect," I said, tryin' to look easy.

"That's what I figgered," young Tommy said, noddin' slow an' nasty. "What's her name?"

"How'd you know it was a her, anyhow? You're a mighty nosey crew for thieves." I got up, but the rammie who'd brung me here was right behind me. A big paw took my shirt by the collar an' the next thing I knew I was sittin' down agin.

"*What's her name?*"

Kibby was lookin' at Tommy kind of curious-like, but he seen that he had somethin' important on his mind an' didn't interfere none.

"She ain't never had no name," I said. "When I want her, I whistles"

"Whistle. I want to hear it." That young hellion! He knowed durned well a man can't whistle through store teeth.

"I don't need no horse up here."

"Go to the window, then," Tommy said. "Yell 'Susy!' an' see if she'll come."

"She's tied up."

"Try it." All of a sudden he had a great big black old hoss-pistol in his hand, a .45 I could of stuck my head in. He'd had it slung on the back of his hip—funniest draw I ever seen, then or after. I knowed I was licked.

"All right," I said. "You're a clever younker, Tommy. Too bad your eyesight's so bad, or you'd see that noose swingin' back an' forth afore your nose."

Kibby's mouth was as wide open as a Teton cave. When he shut it he snapped like a hound. "Ballinger?" he asked, eyein' me like he was mentally shavin' me an' wishin' he had the razor in his hand.

"That's right, boss. Had me fooled fer a while, but that palaver of his about corporations made me suspi-

cion somethin' wrong. I never knew but one ol' coot who had that line of chatter, an' that was Ballinger—all the way acrost Wyomin' he was makin' big words about Territories and Gov'mints."

He h'isted the pistol. "I been waitin' a long time fer this," he said, an' he didn't sound like he was foolin' none. "I didn't set no store by my paw's brains, but if I'd a wanted him gunned, I'd a done it myself. He warn't doin' nobody no harm, an' I reckon that's his gold you got in our safe. You bought it with lead; you c'n sell it back to me—same price."

I knew it warn't no good to say I didn't kill Old Tom. If Tommy was loco enough to believe it now, he wouldn't set no store by any argufyin'. I braced myself for the peacemakin'.

"Wait a minute, Tommy," Kibby said. I durned near fell right over.

"Wait?" Tommy growled. "What fer? He killed—"

"We aren't sure of that. Anyhow, we can't execute him right here. I like things orderly; the town's been quiet lately and we can't shoot a man down on suspicion without showing our hands before the draw's filled. We'll have a trial and string him up by due process of law."

"Well," said Tommy, dubious-like, "if'n you say so. But I'd sure like it to be my bullet that did it."

"You ketched me," I said, feelin' like it was about time I got into this here cozy little talk. "An' you'll bribe your jurors with my dust, an' have Kibby for judge. What more do you want?"

"Shut up, you. What'll we do with him, boss?"

Kibby thunk that out for a minute. "In the old storeroom," he decided finally. "Down at the end of the hall. Hubbins, you're detailed as guard, and if you let him get out, you'll answer to me for it."

"All right, boss," the big lummox behind me said. He picked me up an' set me on my feet agin. "Git goin', Pop."

He pushed me out the door an' into the hall. It run lengthwise, from north to south of the second story, side-to-side with the street. At the end there was a door openin' into a room you couldn't of got a horse an' a man into at the same time; there was a dusty old window at the back, a couple of cobwebby overland trunks that looked like the Spaniards'd left 'em behint on the way to Californy the fust time; an' lots of hot, stale air.

"Mind openin' the window a mite?"

"That there window ain't been opened since the Halfway was built," the lummox said. "An' I got no mind to try it now. Sit down on one of them trunks, an' mind yer manners."

So I sat. He slammed the door to an' sat down afore it, pullin' two derringers an' settin' one beside either foot.

He didn't look sleepy, neither; dumb, but quick. It looked like a right long night.

WELL, IT was long, right enough, but sort of interestin', too. I still got the scar over my right ear to prove it.

For a while I just sat an' looked at my feet. Then I looked at Hubbins' feet. His weren't no prettier'n mine, but his boots was nicer. Pretty soon somebody rapped sharp-like on the door, an' Hubbins let Kibby in.

"Yer too late for dinner," I said, shaking my ringlets. "I fed it all to the dog."

"You've got spirit, Ballinger," said Kibby. "Hubbins, give me those derringers and go get a lantern—how are you going to keep an eye on him when it gets dark?"

He settled himself on the other trunk, jugglin' the guns an' lookin' at the floor. His boots weren't so white now. "Maybe you've had enough time to think things over, Ballinger. You and I know that you didn't kill Lead Mitchell. I'm not saying *who* did, understand—but just between us, I'll grant that you didn't, either."

"Now, that there's right white of you, Kibby. If'n I didn't know better, I'd suspicion it meant somethin'."

I didn't rile him none. "It does," he said. "Young Tommy is hot for your blood, but he listens to me.

Maybe I could persuade him that you're innocent."

"What for?"

"The gold."

"You've got it already," I said. playin' dumb.

"I want the rest. You must have dumped Lead's pan, but we found some gold-bearing gangue in the creek. The water froze over the winter, and when it thawed we got a rush of dust for about two or three weeks. Then it stopped, and the creek's dry now, of course. What happened—did you pan the stuff out up above? You couldn't have stopped it all—some of it would have gotten by and we'd have seen it. How did you stop the gold without stopping the water?"

"I got no idee what you're talkin' about," I said. "If'n there was gold in that there crick, it's a surprise to me—I thought Old Tom was plumb crazy for workin' that claim."

"Now you're just being stubborn," Kibby said, lookin' like I'd hurt his feelin's. "I'm offering you a fair bargain, and you'd be an idiot to refuse it. Is any amount of gold worth your life to you? I'll tell you what—"

He broke off sudden. Out in the hall the lummox's big feet was clumpin' in our direction.

"I got the lantern, boss."

"Light it and hang it from the hook. No, in the center of the room, so it doesn't cast any shadows—that's it. Now wait outside 'til I call you."

When the door shut agin, I said. "I ain't no foolisher'n you. You admit yourself how I couldn't of stopped all the gold from comin'f down from wherever that crick comes out'n the mountains. So why insist as how I did?"

"Because there was gold in the stream, and you were the only man who knew it. Don't you want to live, Ballinger?"

"Shore." He warn't foolin' me none. The minute I tole him what he wanted to know, I'd be a dead old duster, an' I knew it. But I could begin to see somethin' sort of hopeful. "If'n I tell you anythin' you want to know, will you give me my deed?"

"I'll give you your life. That's all."

I made like I was considerin' it. "I got to worry it a bit. It ain't easy, givin' over all your money an' the on'y thing your podner left behind to boot."

"All right." He stood up and started for the door.

"Just a minute. I got one question."

He turned again. "I don't promise to answer," he said. "What is it?"

"Where did you get that white hat?"

He laughed, uncertain-like. "In Fort Pierre. Why—is that important? You're smart, Ballinger, but you can't outsmart me; I know for a fact that that hat doesn't implicate me in anything—and even if it did, you'd be in no position to use the evidence."

"You talk big," I said. "But I'll bet you're skeered to let me look at it close."

He laughed agin', an' tossed the hat to me. I took a step towards the window and got it under the lamplight direct. Then, just when he was passin' the derringers to the lummox, I jammed the hat on my head over my coon cap an' dived head foremost through the window.

3

HUBBINS was pretty quick, I got to admit it. He got a shot off at me before I hit ground. The hittin' near did me in, but I got to my feet somehow.

There was blood runnin' down the right side of my head; I reckon a long thin splinter of the glass'd stabbed through the sombrero. Well, I was right lucky to get away that easy. Upstairs there was a lot of cussin' an' then the other derringer went off, shootin' way over my head. Kibby was a-shoutin' like a travellin' preacher, an' pretty soon lots of feet started poundin' in an' around the Halfway.

I let 'em pound. I took out my teeth an' gave out a whistle, real soft. For a minute I warn't sure whether or not Susy heard me, but then she come nosin' aroun' the side of the buildin', feelin' real pleased with her-

self. Tommy'd knowed that I never used no bridle, Susy bein' a smart horse, an' so he knowed that I couldn't of had her tied up; but from that he'd gone to figger I was lyin' about whistlin' for her. I was glad I'd let him think so.

I took the scattergun an' a handful of shells off'n the pommel, an' slapped her flank. She took off right obedient, goin' at a good cut, an' pretty soon somebody heared her an' went after. I didn't waste no time standin' around waitin' to hear if she was leadin' a p'rade or just a single rider. I had to make cover.

I found the kitchen door without no trouble. The room was empty, like I'd figgered; the cook and the wash-boy was out front seein' what all the commotion was. I lifted the lid off the coal-hole an' got down in it. If'n Kibby ever seen me agin, he'd have good cause to name me "Dirty."

Not more'n a second later, a whole passel of feet went thunderin' through like a herd of wild hosses, an' on out in back. I waited 'til the shoutin' faded a bit, an' then got out an' made for the stairs.

I went right straight down the upstairs hall an' back into the little storeroom, where I got a right artistic rear view of Kibby, leanin' out the window an' bellerin' fit to be tied. I hit him hard at the back of the skull with the shotgun stock, an' then h'isted his feet off'n the floor an' threw. He went out without stoppin' to say adios, but he sure did holler. He stopped hollerin' when he hit.

Then I went back to his office. I didn't waste no time on that there rickety safe in front—any time Kibby put valu'bles in a weak safe it'd be a wet day in Death Valley. I went right on back into the private room an' shut the door.

I still had the beeswax I'd bought from Mac Tanner in Lead, an' if I remembered rightly from some years back, I knew a use for it. I broke open a half dozen shotgun shells an' bled the black powder all around the crack of the little safe door, tampin' it with the wax as I went. I left a corner open, but I pounded that there wax in hard, without lettin' myself worry over when somebody'd be back.

Soon's I finished that, I made a powder train to back behind the safe, hunkered down, an' lit it. Let me tell you, I was never so all-fired discouraged in my life. That there explosion was no harder than a hoss's cough, seemed like.

I WAS REAL surprised when I come around agin an' seen the busted hinge, but I didn't stop to figger it out. I put my muscles in workin' order an' tugged, an' finally I had the top left corner out far enough to stick my paw inside. I got the chamois dust-bag first, but I let it go—I wasn't needin' no spendin' money right then. Finally I hit somethin' that crackled, an' gave it a quick yank, an' a quicker look. It was the deed, right enough.

I was just fixin' to stuff it in my sirt when a boot hit the door like a cannonball, I hitched up the shotgun.

It was young Tommy. He had that big black Colt in his hand, but he didn't have it up, an' a shotgun's twin muzzles look mighty broad an' deep at close range.

"Come on in," I said, "an' shut the door behind you polite-like."

He did, but he cussed somethin' shockin'. "Drop that pacifier," I said, "an' listen to some good sense for oncet. I'm goin' to give you a fortune—not that you've earned it nohow. Old Tom's claim is yourn, not Kibby's. There's gold on it. Kibby don't know how to get it out, an' it's a sure thing he won't let you try less'n you make him."

He looked at me steady, an' I could see without no trouble that he hated my guts, an' didn't believe one durned word I said. "You stole that claim," he said. "You killed my paw for it. I'll git mine from it as soon as we figger out why it's got no gold on it now."

"For a smart boy you're intolerable stupid. Kibby won't give you more'n enough to buy makin's. He never even told you you owned more'n half of it."

I could see him kind of waverin'. "Prove it."

I handed him the deed. Nobody

could miss that shaky, sputtery old quill that Old Tom writ with, an' writin' was passable rare in them parts. Tommy read it. I watched him close. I respeck writin', but I don't savvy it none myself—I knowed the paper by the hand, not the words. I prayed hard that it said what Old Tom'd tol' me it sid.

An' I guess it must of. Tommy was white when he got down to the bottom of the foolscap. He looked at me, an' he looked at the deed, an' he couldn't even say nothin'.

"I puzzled out how the crick works," I told him. "I spent a hard time in the Tetons to find out. Kibby ain't got the guts to do it, an' you don't even know rightly how to start."

"You killed my paw," Tommy said, hoarse as an old crow.

"Kibby killed your paw. I seen most of it happen. If'n you'd of stuck with him at the start, he'd still be alive now."

I could see that shook him up again, an' I jumped right in on it. "Looky here, Tommy, I ain't sellin' you nothin'—on'y snakes like Kibby sells men's lives for dust. I said I was givin' you what's yours, an' I am. All I want is my own dust that I worked for in Californy; that there share in Lead warn't none of my workin'. Keep the deed, an'—"

"What'll we do then? Kibby owns this here territory, right down to the ground." He stopped an' looked up at me, an' durned if he warn't sort of cryin'. He was a Mitchell, I guess, down at the botton of his heart somewheres. I felt poorly myself; 'tain't every day a man sees a stray come home.

"No, he don't," I said. "He on'y wants to. If'n we c'n git free to Fort Pierre, we'll file the claim legal. Kibby won't take no more'n a fraction of the gold while we're gone; that there stream doesn't cross the gold-till in the Tetons exceptin' durin' spring floods an' autumn rainy season—it has to overflow into a new channel to run over the lode, an' I figger I'm the on'y man knows where that happens. Took me a right unpleasant winter to find it out—even

There was a real sudden clompin' of horses outside, an' Kibby's voice, a mite cracked, yelled, "Burn him out!"

Tommy bent over an' picked up his .45. I didn't stop him.

"*I'll* show *you*," he said. "Let's git goin'—it's a long way to Fort Pierre."

It was, too, but it felt real good to jog along thinkin' unChristian thoughts about the .45 slug decoratin' Jess Kibby's right shoulder. It felt good to be makin' the round trip with a Mitchell, too.

THE END

Judge Bates and Tobacco Jones

Return in Our Next Issue
Watch for This Feature Novel
by Lee Floren

JUDGE BATES'

June Issue on Sale April 1st

TRIGGER TRAP

SATAN'S GOLDEN GUNS

By Robert Turner

(Author of "Swan Song For Sixguns")

Humphrey Pomm's gratitude sent Nick Jardine on a strange mission, to find the golden guns of Satan Hawks and follow their trail to buried gold. But old Pomm hadn't realized that his gift to Jardine would most likely be desert death

Lola dropped, her gun as an arm suddenly went around her throat.

A Powerful Novelet of the Go ld Rush

1

AS NICK JARDINE came out of the El Dorado Hotel, that midnight, he could feel almost with a physical impact the pulsing, feverish excitement of this gold-mad shacktown that had swelled and burst at the seams and become a brawling, sprawling city of nearly fifteen thousand people.

He stood there for a moment, getting his bearings, letting the pushing, jostling street crowds swirl around him. He had once been a big, powerfully-built man, this Nic Jardine, but the malaria he'd contracted, crossing the Isthmus, had thinned him down to a wolf-like gauntness. It had hollowed his cheeks and dulled his eyes to flat gray. His hard-hewn, craggy features had always held a tough and raffish look but the long death-fight with the fever and the hellish trip up the Pacific coast in the packed hold of a ship, had increased it a thousandfold.

In the crowd that swept around Jardine, a couple of bearded, burly prospectors, fresh in from the gold fields, bleary-eyed drunk and hunting trouble, tried to shoulder him

out of the way. Jardine set his legs apart and held his ground. Both men stopped, hunched their shoulders and balled their fists at their sides, started to cuss him out. But slowly, the oaths stopped tumbling from their loose lips as they saw the cast of Jardine's jaw, the flat, steel-gray coldness of his stare. They took in the hugeness of his bony frame, obvious even under the loose-hanging corduroy jacket and whipcord breeches tucked into the tops of black boots. One of the prospectors grabbed the elbow of the other and mumbling some inarticulate apology, steered around Jardine and melted into the crowd as it moved on.

Jardine took a deep breath, hitched at the gun-belt with the empty holsters hanging from it, that was draped around his lean hips and pushed down-street into the crowd.

Slowly, the feverish excitement of the city began to blend with the strange inner excitement that had been mounting inside Jardine, from the moment he'd checked into the hotel, and boiled to a head. He quickened his long stride and in a few moments he was stepping up onto the stoop of a great, barn-like building with a sign over the front that said in man-high letters: QUEEN BEA'S PLACE. He swung on one side for a moment as the batwings suddenly flung open and two gorilla-shouldered bouncers gave the grand heave-ho to a cursing, drunken bullwhacker.

The bouncers brushed off their hands and gave Jardine a suspicious once-over with their cold, hard eyes. Jardine held their gaze, evenly and pushed between them into the saloon. A great burst of sound struck his ears a cacophony of noises, roaring laughter, the giggling and squealing hostesses and percentage girls, the clicking of poker chips and the clinking of hundreds of glasses, the off-key tiny tempo of a jig-time piano tune, men's voices raised in drunken song.

JARDINE'S EYES swept a quick appraising glance through the dense fog of smoke that hung under the flickering light of a bent and twisted second-hand crystal chandelier. From the time he was a kid, Nick Jardine had been raised and brought up and worked in combination gaming casinos and saloons like this. He'd seen them up and down the East coast, in river-front towns along the Mississippi and The Big Muddy. But he'd never seen anything quite like this.

Queen Bea's place was the center, the rotten core and heart of the gold fields, even though the nearest panning and sluicing and digging took place miles away. It was here that the dust and nuggets came first to be doubled or trebled—or lost. Jardine could almost feel the thump and throb of the gold rush fever in this place. The lid had burst right off, at Queen Bea's. The lust for money and more money was wide open and raw and exposed; there were no pretences.

Jardine saw men at the green-topped poker tables, at the roulette and monte and faro layouts, jam-packed together, fighting each other for the chance to risk the poke of yellow dust that they'd sweated and slaved—and sometimes killed—to acquire. He saw the girls who worked for Queen Bea, yanking hair and clawing with carmined nails at each other, to sell their favors for a spilling of the dusty yellow wealth from some newly duded-up miner fresh in from his diggings. And then in turn, rush to one of the gaming layouts, to either lose or add to their newly acquired stake. Fortunes large and small, constantly changed hands within a few hours.

And as Jardine's flat, gray gaze moved around, it found the balcony that ran along the side and back of Queen Bea's place. It found the great fat, female Buddha of a woman who was at the vortex of this sucking whirlpool of gold, into whose safe, it all eventualy found its way.

She was standing on the balcony, leaning over the rail, looking down

on the gold-crazed confusion below. Bea Markette was taller and heavier than most men. She wore a silver-sequined evening gown, her massive, meaty arms and shoulders powdered a sickly white. About the layers of fat where her several chins joined her fleshy throat, diamond chokers winked in the dull light. Her hair, dyed a blinding orange-red, was piled high in a stylish pompadour, crowned with an emerald-studded tiara. From each plump, pale finger, a different jewel flashed its own glitter and she held a long, solid gold cigarette holder to brightly painted kewpie-doll lips and sucked in smoke and let it trail out again through her thick, flat nostrils. Bea Markette's eyes were like little pinpoints of icy blue light flashing out from the suety pouches of flesh above and below them. The highly-arched, thin black lines of her penciled brows gave her whole fat, evil face an incongruous look of pseudo surprise and innocence.

Those eyes constantly watched the action on the main floor of the saloon and gaming casino, below. They saw, now, a huge, redbearded seaman off a slave ship, grappling with one of Bea's girls, in a booth almost below the proprietres. He had his hands around the girl's throat and was throttling her.

Lazily, Bea Markette reached to a table next to her and picked up a heavy silver urn full of flowers. She lifted it over the railing and dropped it, flowers and all, down upon the head of the obstreporous seaman below. The girl backed off, as the seaman fell unconscious to the floor, clutching her thin throat and looking up at Bea and then scuttling off toward a curtained doorway in the rear.

IT WAS right after this that Nick Jardine saw Bea's roving glance catch him, standing near the doorway, pass on and stop and come shifting quickly back and stay there. Swiftly, before her glance could pass on, Jardine reached down to his empty twin holsters, unhooked the gun belt and slipped it off of his waist. He stood there, holding the belt and empty holsters in his hand, looking up from under his brows at the fat woman on the balcony. He felt sweat break out along the small of his back and under his arms and trickle coldly along his ribs. He felt the pulses in his wrists and temples throbbing and for a moment, it seemed his heart stopped. This was the moment he'd been waiting for so long. This could mean nothing, or everything, as the result of a trek of thousand of miles. This was the sign he was making, which would bring about either the final fulfillment or failure of his desperate mission. If the woman, Queen Bea Markette, didn't pick up his sign, if she turned away....

She turned away. She spun surprisingly quickly for a woman of her bulk, on her high heels, without another look down, away from the balcony railing and disappeared in the shadows at the back of the balcony.

Jardine felt his big bony fever-ravaged slacken and slump in despair. His heart started in again, but with a slow, measured beat of dejection. The sweat began to go cool and clammy under his shirt and a slight shivering that wasn't entirely from the remains of the malaria still within him, took him.

"Oh, Lord!" he mumbled half aloud. "It's no good. It was all just a story. A sick, dying man's mad raving. It didn't mean a thing. I've come all this way, gone through all that hell for nothing. Now I'll never find the Golden Guns of Satan!"

He swung the gunbelt and empty holsters back around his lean waist and under the tails of his jacket and pushed through the mob toward the hands of perfume-reeking hostesses. He made it to the bar and pushed his way in. He downed three straight shots of rotgut that seemed to burn a hole right through his belly. And then he straightened himself up, shaking himself a little, like a great shaggy wolf that's been wounded and beaten but not downed.

He was on his way from the bar, back out through the crowds toward

the batwings, when a pair of slim hands that wouldn't be shaken off, touched his sleeves. A voice that was not whining and suggestive and wheedling crept into his ears. It was not begging him to buy a drink or a turn at the wheels of chance for its owner. It was saying simply; "Listen to me mister! I keep telling you— The Queen Bea wants to see you. Her word is law, here. You refuse and you'll never get out of those batwings aive."

He stopped and as her words sunk in the excitement came beating like a bat's wings, back into his brain again. He turned to the girl who had approached him with the message. With a little surprise, he saw that she was not dressed in a sketchy, flashy evening gown like the other girls in the lace. She wore a simple black crushed linen suit. She wore no makeup, nor needed none. The fresh brightness of her black eyes cheeks and the mouth, red and sweet as a dew-kissed rose, were enough. Her hair was a shiny chestnut color, pulled back flat and tight from a white, straight center part.From behind her small, perfectly formed ears, her hair tumbled about her shoulders in thick, soft coils.

"I'm a stranger here," Jardine told the girl. "Reckon there must be some mistake. Nobody here would want any business with me."

The girl pursed her lips impatiently, her black eyes trying not to waver before the direct, admiring look in his. "Please don't argue. Come with me. The Queen Bea doesn't like to be kept waiting. Come, Nick Jardine!"

His shaggy eyebrows raised. "You know my name?"

"Of course. She's been waiting for you, nearly a year. Every night she stands for hours on that balcony, waiting for you, watching for you. Come."

HE PERMITTED her small, capable looking hands to tug his sleeve, to lead him through the crowd, toward the rear of the saloon. "Who are *you*?" he asked.

"Lola Simmons I—I work for Miss Markette."

Jardine gestured to a painted-up blonde girl, with her head thrown back, laughing, as she struggled beftween two husky, cursing mule-skinners, each trying to maul her sway from the other. "So does she," Jardine said, with a wry grin.

He saw Lola Simmons stiffen and raise her chin, haughtily. Her eyes flashed the fire of temper at him. "I ought to slap you for that," she said. "I'm Miss Markette's private secretary. I take care of her accounts."

Jardine didn't have a chance to speak again as they came to a stairwell and Lola lifted her skirts above slender ankles and flew up the steps ahead of him. At the top, she turned down a dimly lit corridor, walking primly on hurried short steps, in front of him, not turning back nor giving him another chance to converse with her. She came to a door at the far end of the hallway and stood to one side. "Please enter," she said.

2

NICK JARDINE stepped past Lola Simmons and into a room that was crowded with a huge, rolltopped desk, a mammoth safe and the tremendous bulk of Queen Bea Markette, herself. She was sitting at the desk, a great expanse of her fat, powered white back showing the thin straps of the evening gown cutting into the flesh of her shoulders, the emerald tiara glittering in the light from an oil lamp on the desk.

"Sit down, Nick Jardine and make yourself t'home," a rumbling, almost masculine voice bade him. "You're a little late."

He heard the door of the office slam behind him and moved toward a ricketty looking straight chair against the wall opposite the safe. He jacknifed his long, rangy body down on-

to the chair, his fingers clenching and unclenching on his lap.

"Yuh," he said. "I was delayed a mite. I had some trouble."

"Oh?" Bea Markette said. "Where is Humphrey Pomm?"

"Six feet under the rotting muck of the Panamanian jungles. He—before he kicked the traces—Humphrey said to give you his love."

The big woman, still bent over her desk, without turning to face her caller, swore in a low rumble, running the words all together, professionaly. "The dirty little bow-legged stinker!" she finished up. She turned then and quickly, trying to keep Jardine from seeing it, dashed moisture away from her fat buried eyes with one jeweled hand.

They sat there, for a moment, then, staring at each other, sizing each other up and Jardine couldn't help marveling to himself at this whole fantastic deal. He kept remembering gnarled and bowlegged little Humphrey Pomm, his wizened little face yellowed and wasted with the final ravages of the fever, lying there, on a cot in a stinking tropical hut, his eyes burning up at Jardine as he whispered:

"You won't believe it, mister, when you see the Queen Bea. You won't believe that a mountain of a woman like her could ever have anything to do with a dried up little shrimp like m'self."

Humphrey had been right. It was hard to believe that they had been man and wife. Bea Markette could have picked up the little prospector with one fat pinky and slung him over the moon.

"How come the little sluice-rat picked on you?" Bea Markette demanded suddenly "Where did you meet him? How did you get to know him?"

Jardine took a deep breath. "It's a long story," he told her. "I'll try to cover up in a hury. You know how it is on the Isthmus, with all the riff-raff from the Atlantic side crowding across to board a ship to come up here and all the newly rich and beaten or fagged-out, from the Pacific side, pushing their way back to the Atlantic to come home. The mad trading of mining equipment. There was almost as much dinero to be made there, as here. I'm a gambler, ma'am, by trade. I was on my way here, when I saw that it wasn't necessary to go any farther than the Isthmus to get my share of the gold."

The big woman chuckled and nodded her head until the wattle of fat around her neck jigged. "Go on, go on!" she urged.

"I worked in a place called Lazy Lou's," Jardine continued. "It was only a hole in the wall, compared to what you have here. But the pickin's were good for a man with a deck of cards and a set of fast fingers and sharp eyes. Don't get me wrong, ma'am; I'm no sharper. I win honestly, or I don't win at all... Anyhow, one night I spotted a bowlegged little weatherbeaten oldster getting taken over in a game of red dog by a group of sharpers. I felt sorry for the little old codger and the way they were cheatin' hell out o' him, was brutal. I reckon I was a fool, but I had to stick my nose into the game. I saved Humphrey Pomm's money for him and later, when the gunplay started, his life. In the excitement, he disappeared and I didn't see him again for several months. I'd practically forgotten about him.

"Then I got a message to go out to a jungle village and I found Humphrey there, dyin' of malaria."

HE WATCHED Bea Markette knuckle her eyes again, her full, painted lips tight against her teeth. He went on: "Humphrey was grateful to me for what I had done for him, that night in Lazy Lou's, so he told me the yarn of Satan's golden guns. It sounded pretty fantastic and right up until I got your message downstairs, I'd figured myself to be on a fool's errand. But when you spotted me, sent for me, I began to feel that there was something to the story. Where are the guns?"

Bea Markette chuckled a little. She fitted a long white, Russian cigarette into her gold holder, inhaled deeply and blew out a rolling cloud of blue smoke. Talking through it, she said:

"There's a chance you're not the right man, not the real Jardine that Humphrey sent me the message about. Other men could answer your description, could have learned of part of the story, somewhere and come in here tonight, like you did, with empty holsters, hoping to pry the whole story out of me. You tell me the yarn as Humphrey told it to you. Jardine. If it's complete, then I'll know you're the right hombre and I won't be givin' anything away, nor makin' any mistake."

So he did that. Swiftly, he repeated the wild yarn old Humphrey Pomm had related to him. It had begun shortly after the first discovery of gold at Captain Sutter's mill. Humphrey Pomm had been out here, prospecting before that and was one of the first to make a big strike, along with his pardner, a man who because of the devil-like cast to his long thin features, had been nicknamed Satan Hawks.

After the first excitement had worn off, the two lucky prospectors had worked their diggings at the end of an isolated canyon, to the limit. The biggest part of their newly acquired wealth, they had then buried where nobody else could ever possibly find it. With the rest, they were going to 'Frisco, to have a good time. The idea was to make sure that they didn't lose, or throw away the whole of their fortune. To make certain that neither partner double-crossed the other one, and that nobody else would be able to find the bubried treasure, Humphrey Pomm and Satan Hawks cooked up the following plan.

In New Orleans, Satan Hawks had once purchased a pair of hand-tooled sixguns, with gold-plated, grips. They were his pride and joy. It was he who had decided that these guns would hold the secret of the buried gold. So the two prospectors had drawn up a map, torn it in half and hidden each half in one of the guns. The map was so drawn up, that neither part was any good without the other. Then Satan Hawks had given one of the guns to Humphrey Pomm.

A few days later, in 'Frisco, Satan Hawks had disappeared; Humphrey waited for him to come back so they could return for the gold, but he never saw Satan again. Meanwhile, Humphrey had settled in the city and married the woman who called herself Bea Markette, who ran a saloon and gaming house which was to grow and prosper through the gold boom until it was the biggest place in town. He gave his golden gun to Bea to put into her safe. A few months later, he'd heard news that Satan Hawks was in New York and had set out down to cross the Isthmus to go after him. Then he had been taken sick with the fever, during which time he'd gotten another message from Bea, this time, that Satan Hawks had come back to Frisco. He'd been wounded fatally in a gun battle, but had gotten to Bea Markette before he died and given her the other golden gun to put in her safe.

When Humphrey Pomm heard this, realizing that he, himself, was not going to live to get back to 'Frisco, he had summoned Nick Jardine, one man he figured he could trust and told him the story. At the same time, he sent a message to Bea, telling her that he was sending Jardine who knew the whole story, to help her. She needed a man to help her go after the buried gold, but Humphrey didn't want her to trust any of the gold-mad miners who hung out at the saloon, he wanted Jardine to help her. And for his trouble, Jardine was to get Satan Hawks' half of the buried bonanza.

WHEN NICK Jardine finished telling his story, Bea Markette nodded her head and got up from her desk. "That sounds like the straight of it. And I can understand how it would sound to you like the mouthings of a madman, but I'll get those golden guns of Satan Hawks, now and show you for a fact that Humphrey's story was true."

Jardine grinned: "If so, it was worth catching the malaria, myself and goin' through everything I have to get here. I'd go through hell, it's own self I reckon, for $50,000 worth of gold nuggets."

He watched the fat woman waddle over to the safe and squat down in front of it. He listened to the falling of tumblers sounding faintly in the quiet of the little office, as she spun the combination. Finally, there was the squeaking of the heavy door of the safe as it swung open. When she stood up and turned around, Bea Markette had a set of twin six-shooters by their long barrels, their golden butt-grips glistening in the dull lamp glow. She walked over to Nick Jardine and handed them to him.

"The sections of map are hidden under the grips."

Jardine took the guns, went over to the desk, under the lamp and with his jacknife, quickly pried off the gold-plated grips. He stared down at them or a long time, then straightened up, frowning, the muscled ridge of his jaws, tight. Through his teeth, he said:

"There is *nothing* under these gun grips—nothing at all!"

"What!" the giant saloon proprietress hurled herself across the office, fumbled at the guns with her fat fingers. "Gone!" she kept saying. "They were *there!* I saw them. Now they're gone. Somebody got to the guns and stole the pieces of map. They've stolen our treasure, Jardine!"

She reached out and gripped his arms with her fat, jeweled fingers and the grip was almost as strong as a man's. She shook him. "You stupid string-bean, you must've talked! You must have mentioned Humphrey's story to somebody and they beat you here, broke in here and somehow opened the safe and—"

"Cut it!" he stopped her. "That safe shows no signs of being forced open. Somebody used the combination. Who knows it, beside yourself?"

She shook her head, standing there, dazed looking. "No one," she said, dully. 'No one knows it. I don't see how—" She broke off, the fat of her hooded eyes almost closing completely over them. "Unless it's Lola Simmons. She's been in here when I've opened the safe. She could have watched or listened to the combination. It has to be her. It couldn't be anybody else."

ALMOST before Bea Markette finished speaking, Jardine leaped toward the door, caught the knob in his big hand and swung it open. Lola Simmons stood there, her darkly pretty face looking pale and frightened, but determined. She held a derringer in her right hand, levelly. She said:

"That's right Queen Bea. It *was* I who took the sections of map from the golden guns of Satan Hawks. And I'll tell you why. Because you lied in your teeth about Satan dying. You had him killed. Right here looking for Humphrey Pomm, so that they could go back together to get their treasure in gold nuggets. And you thought it would be a good idea to have the whole thing. You—"

"The girl's gone loco!" Bea Markette interrupted. "Don't believe her, Jardine... Lola, how can you even say such a thing. You weren't even working for me when Satan Hawks came back here."

"I know that," Lola admitted. "I came here to find out what happened to Satan."

"Why?" Jardine asked. "What was he to you?"

"He was my father," she said, her breath catching a little in her throat. All the time he was out here prospecting, he kept me in a school back East. When I didn't hear from him for months, I left the school and set out to look for him. I traced him as far as this saloon and then when I couldn't seem to get any farther, I applied for a job with you, Miss Markette, under another name. Not long afterward, I happened to spot the golden guns in your safe and remembered my father showing them to me, once. One of the grips was loose where you'd pried it open before and I saw part of the map sticking out. So I took both parts. I waited my time, then, to learn what had happened to

my father. Tonight, eavesdropping on your conversation with Steve Jardine, I heard the story you told. I realized it wasn't the truth and figured out what really happened."

"If you can prove that yarn, Lola," Jardine said. "If you really are the daughter of Satan Hawks. that means his share of the buried gold is yours. I reckon I'll have to just step out of the picture."

"I can prove it all right," she said. "I—"

The rest of the sentence was cut off, as Lola Hawks suddenly half turned toward a sound in the hallway behind her. She was a second too late. A husky, hairy arm went around her throat from behind. Another arm knocked the derringer from her hand. The man who had grabbed Lola from behind, now came into the angle of Nick Jardine's vision, past the door jamb.

He was a squat, powerfully built, barrel-chested figure of a man, with huge, bunched shoulders and a bull-neck. He had a leonine mane of shaggy blond hair and thick, yellow brows over his deeply sunken green eyes. His mouth was big and loose and moist looking. Most of the bones in his nose had been smashed so that it was twisted and spread half across his face. Over the top of Lola's dark head, as she struggled in vain to break free, the blond man showed a set of tobacco stained and crooked teeth.

"What's goin' on here, Miss Bea? This little secretary o' yourn turnin' out to be a female bandit?"

"No!" Bea Markette forced a husky laugh. "It's all right, Wolf Conrad. Just a little personal trouble between the two of us. Now she's disarmed, mebbe I can talk a little sense into her fool young head. Kick that derringer over here and then turn her loose."

Wolf Conrad did that and Lola Hawks stepped away from him, rubbing her throat, patting loose curls of her hair back into place. Conrad just stood there, grinning, wolfishly, looking first at Nick Jardine, then at Bea Markette, with a curiously sly grin on his heavy featured, stupid looking face.

He jerked his head at Jardine. "This son givin' yuh any trouble, Miss Bea?"

She shook her jowels, impatiently. "No, no, Wolf. Everything's all right now. What was it you wanted?"

He told her that there had been a dispute at the bar over the price of drinks and one of the customers was demanding to see her.

"Tell him I'm too busy right now," Bea Markette said. "Settle the thing any way you want, Wolf. You bartenders are in complete control of the bar when I'm not around. Now beat it. And don't disturb me again." She bent suddenly and picked up the little derringer Wolf Conrad had kicked toward her. She pointed it at Lola. "You, honey, stay right here. We got some more palaverin' to do."

3

SHE WAITED until Wolf Conrad slammed the door shut behind him, then said: "All right, Lola. You must have the parts of the map. Let's have them!" She waggled the derringer at Lola, meanacingly.

Lola looked frightened and undecided. Her long-lashed black eyes glanced fleetingly at Jardine, as though for help or advice. Finally, he said:

"Do as she says, kid. Like I told you, before, you give us proof of bein' this Satan Hawks' daughter and I'll see that you get your share."

With that, Lola Hawks turned her back to them, hiked up her skirt and fumbled about for a moment. When she straightened and turned around, she held two little slips of crumpled paper in her hand and a tiny gold locket. She walked over to Bea Markette's desk and set them both down near the lamp. "There are the two sections of the map," she said, "And proof that I'm Lola Hawks."

Still holding the derringer, Bea Markette waddled over and picked up the pieces of paper, glanced at them quickly and passed them over to Jardine. Looking at the small,

stained and almost illegible scraps of paper, he saw that they showed a simply drawn map of a region called Red Rock Canyon. In small, cramped lettering, the instructions said:

"Two miles inside Red Rock Canyon find tepee rock. Stand on rock at ten forenoon and walk where shadow falls one hundred paces an start diggin'."

The locket that Jardine held showed a small picture of a long-faced man, with slanting eyebrows and a sharply hooked nose and a widows peak over his forehead. On the back of the locket were inscribed the words: *To my daughter Lola, from her loving father, John M. Hawks ..*

Jardine said to Bea Markette: "This seems to do it. The gal's claim seems legit. What happens now?"

Bea Markette tapped the long gold cigarette holder against her dumpling-fat cheeks for a moment, then said: "Tomorrow morning, we'll all set out for Red Rock Canyon and dig up the hidden gold. We'll pack it back into town on some extra burros and split the take three ways. Fair enough?"

Jardine looked at Lola and she nodded imperceptibly. He shrugged. "Two wimmin against one poor man," he said, grinning. "I reckon it's settled no matter what I say."

They talked for awhile longer, making their plans for the morning and as they talked their excitement mounted. When Jardine finally left them to return to his hotel, he lay on his iron-runged bed, in the small room for long hours, unable to get to sleep. He kept thinking about all that had happened since that first night down on the Isthmus when he'd met Humphrey Pomm. He kept thinkabout the girl, Lola Hawks and how if they pooled their shares of the gold together it would make a right nice sum enough for a couple to buy a fine spread somewhere. For the first time, he realized that he wasn't getting any younger and that the roaming life he'd been leading was beginning to pall. He wondered how it would be to settle down somewhere for good, with a girl like Lola. It was on that pleasant thought that Nick Jardine went to sleep.

THE NEXT MORNING he felt more refreshed and physically fit than he had since before he'd been struck down with the fever in Panama. He didn't know whether it was at the prospect of seeing Lola Hawks again, or because of the excitement of going after the hidden gold treasure of a couple of old prospectors who had struck it rich.

He shaved and dressed, left the hotel and purchased a brace of six-guns from the local gunsmith, to fill his empty holsters and met Lola and Bea Markette at the appointed time in front of the Queen Bea's Place. They were already waiting for him, mounted on pack mules, with an extra mount for him and two others to pack back the gold nuggets.

Even in the bright morning sun, Lola Hawks looked pretty, he noticed. Her dark eyes were fresh and clear looking. And even the simple lines of the blue workshirt and levis, she wore, couldn't hide the gently curved richness of her figure. The bright sunlight didn't do so well by Bea Markette. The older woman's red hair was tucked up under a large Stetson. Her huge, dumpy figure was tightly encased in cordueroy jacket and trousers tucked into the tops of hobled boots. Her face looked puffy and tired, the heavy dewlaps of unhealthy looking flesh around her jaws a pasty white. Without her makeup and flashing jewels, without the bright background of her noisy saloon and gaming hall, in the cruel light of day, Bea Markette was just a too fat, tired old woman, with the taint of dissipation and a suggestion of evil in her ugly, fatty face.

As they rode out of town. Nick Jardine couldn't help remembering Lola's accusation that Bea Markette had murdered Satan Hawks in order to have his share of the treasure. If that was true, he couldn't understand the woman saloon keeper agreeing so readily to sharing the gold with both

of them. A strange feeling of uneasiness beset him as they rode farther away from town and into the shadows of the distant mountains. This increased as Bea became grim-faced and grouchy to a greater extent than the discomfort of the ride warranted.

But as they rode the burros into the deep cut in the foothills known as Red Rock Canyon, Jardine slowly forgot his fears in the excitement and suspense of wondering whether or not they would find the buried treasure. He had lived with the fanciful tale he'd heard from old Humphrey Pomm so long, had wondered about its authenticity so many times that it had become like a dream. It was hard to believe that at last he was going to learn the final truth of it.

They reached the huge wigwam shaped hunk of stone, setting in the middle of the dried up river bed at the bottom of the canyon, that was known as Tepee Rock, a few minutes before ten o'clock. On the way out they'd passed many of the snake-roofed cabins and Long Tom sluices of miners; but here in Red Rock canyon there was no sign of any of the thousands of men who had come to the area from all parts of the world to try their luck in prying some of Mother Earth's riches from her lap. Here there was nothing but the solemn quiet of the wilderness place, with a lone hawk swooping and circling in the bright blue of the morning sky over the canyon. It was, Nick Jardine observed, an excellent spot that the two old grubstakers had picked to bury their treasure.

AT THE exact time mentioned on the map, Jardine climbed Tepee Rock. Bea Markette then paced off the distance and stood on the spot, while Jardine clambered down off the rock and with the help of Lola Hawkes, drove the burros toward Bea. For a moment, they all stood there, looking down at the rocky, grave-strewn ground beneath them, a little awed. There was no indication that a fortune in yellow gold nuggets was buried there beneath their feet.

Suddenly Bea Markette laughed, raspingly. She said: "This is the way to mine. You don't waste a lifetime looking. You don't break your back and sweat yourself to death diggin' and diggin' for nothin'. We *know* the gold is here. We dig for a little while and there it is."

Nick Jardine didn't say anything. He didn't remind the woman that what she said was true but only because her husband, who was now dead and his partner, Lola's father, had spent probably the best part of their life in that back-breaking, sweating job. He didn't remind Bea Markette of that because she wouldn't have paid any attention. She would have laughed at him. She had only one thought in her mind, now. There was the crazy, familiar glitter in her rheumy old eyes that he had come to recognize. The gold fever was upon her as burning hot as though she had actually been mining herself and was on the verge of a big strike.

Jardine unpacked the tools from one of the burros and went to work, using pick axe and shovel. He dug a hole almost three feet square and of equal depth before he finally stopped and leaned on the spade, sweat running into his eyes and coursing through the dirt and beard on his cheeks. He said through his teeth: "Something's wrong, somewhere. It isn't here."

So Jardine climbed up out of the hole he'd dug and started in a new place right next to it. This time, he'd dug down six inches, the pick made a ringing sound as it struck metal. He went to work with a fury, then ignoring the aching of his back muscles and biceps. In a few minutes, he had bared the top of a huge metal box. By now, both women were standing at the edge of the put and were egging him on. When he had gotten the first metal box completely unearthed, they helped him lift it out of the whole. With the pick point, he pried off the lid. It was filled with gold nuggets.

While the woman loaded the contents of the first box into the burro packs, Nick Jardine dug up two more. It was an hour later before all the

nuggets were stowed away inside the mule packs. Jardine, now that the excitement was beginning to wear off, felt weary and beat-out. He stood swaying for a moment, in the hot sun, the hard labor that he had put in, the past couple of hours beginning to take its toll on his fever-weakened body. But he managed a grin as he said:

"Mebbe Humphrey Pomm and Satan Hawks can rest in their graves, now. Satan's golden guns have done their jobs. The treasure is found. Let's strike back for town."

He started toward the spot near Bea Markette, where he had stripped off his cartridges belt and gun-filled holsters. He saw Bea suddenly bend and pick them up and held out his hand as he walked toward her, figuring that she was going to hand them to him. But then he stopped short, realizing that he had figured wrong. Bea Markette wasn't handing his gun gear to him. She was pulling the brace of six guns from their leather. She dropped the cartridge belt. She held the guns toward him, all right, but it was a barrel first. She said, her full lips curving at one corner in a sneer:

"Stand, Jardine! You ain't goin' back to town. This is the end o' the trail for you, mister!"

Lola Hawks cried: "What's going on? What's the idea, Miss Markette?"

BEA SWUNG one of the sixguns toward her, covering her. "You, too, dearie," she said. Her pale, flabby face, beaded with sweat, now, formed a mask of a grin. "You two didn't really think I was goin' to split this haul o' gold nuggets with you, did you?"

"So you're givin' us a double deal?" Jardine said.

"Not exactly. You forget, handsome, that my dear, departed husband was the one who made this strike. I only needed your help to get it up out o' the ground."

"You're forgetting a man named Satan Hawks, Humphrey's partner," Jardine reminded her. "Cut me out of it, if you will, ma'am, but give the kid, here, a break." He jerked his head at Lola.

Bea Markette laughed, her flabby, drooping jowels dancing merrily. "S u c h sentiment!" she snorted. "Humphrey picked the right man all right. An honest, sentimental fool. Well, in a moment, you'll see what honesty and sentiment get a person. When you're lyin' here, rottin' and the buzzards are swoopin' down to peck out your eyeballs!"

Jardine felt the hackles along the nape of his neck begin to rise. This woman who had gotten the drop on him didn't have a scruple in her gross body. There was now no doubt in his mind but what she really meant to kill him and Lola both; he half made a move toward rushing her, but brought himself up short as the guns stiffened in her at fists, her plump white forefinger tightening on the triggers.

In desperation, he asked, "Don't you have enough d i n e r o, Bea? You must make a fortune out of that place you run. What good is it goin' to do you to commit double murder just for a few more thousand dollars."

She grinned at him. "I never get enough money, Jardine," she told him. "I reckon it gets to be like a sickness after a while. You get so you want more and more... And it isn't goin' to be double murder—it'll be triple. The kid was right. I did do in her old man, Satan Hawks. He, too, was a trusting, stupid fool."

A little cry came from Lola, then. Looking toward her, Jardine saw that her cheeks were stained with the red of rage. Her tiny fists were clenched at her sides. She started a blind rush at the older woman, screaming: "You fat, lying murderous old witch, I never had any real proof that you killed my father, but now that I know for certain, I'm going to get you for it. I swore that I would. I—"

Jardine cut her off. He yelled: "Wait, Lola! Don't be loco! She'll gun you down. You haven't a chance that way. We might yet be able to reason with her!"

But Lola Hawks' anger and frus-

tration were too great. She paid no heed to Jardine's warning but kept on with her headlong rush toward Bea Markette. Cursing, Jardine started a desperate, last minute leap, as he saw Bea's trigger finger on the gun pointing at Lola began to squeeze.

A second later there was the flat clap-sound of a gunshot echoing back and forth between the walls of the canyon and Jardine stopped his leap to save Lola from Bea Markette's guns. He saw Lola stop, too. He waited to watch her fall, but she didn't; she kept standing there, staring in surprise at Bea. And then Jardine noticed a curious thing. No smoke was trickling from the muzzle of the gun that Bea held.

The next instant, he noticed that the big female saloon keeper was no longer looking at either he or Lola. She was staring into space between them. And then both sixguns held in her fists began to droop, barrel down. When they had dropped back down to her sides, her fat fingers slowly opened and the weapons clattered to the ground.

Then Bea Markette started walking toward them. She took three steps and her legs went out from under her. She murmured: "I—I been double-crossed. We're bein' dry-gulched. We —" The words stopped as a sudden froth of blood appeared on her full lips. Her eyes rolled wildly back into her head and she pitched headlong to the ground. Jardine saw the tiny black bullethole in the back of her corduroy jacket at the same time that another rifle shot echoed from back up the canyon. This time, the bullet went screaming over their heads, hit a jut rock and ricocheted off in another direction, whining its deadly song.

4

JARDINE THREW himself at Lola and pulled her down to the ground with him. He crawled swiftly toward the fallen figure of Bea Markette and scooped up his own sixguns from where she had dropped them. Next, he crawled over to his cartridge belt and got that. Meanwhile, his eyes had been searching along the top of the canyon walls and he saw a flash of flame and a puff of smoke from a clump of sugar pines on the rimrock. A moment later, a few hundred yards farther on, another rifle shot burst forth. As he crawled back, hugging flat to the rock strewn earth, there were two more shots, from different spots along the edge of the cliffs.

He took Lola by the hand and the two of them squirmed along the ground until they reached the temporary shelter of a clump of rocks. Settled there, Jardine watched the places where the first shots had come from and when he saw a sudden movement, he raised up on both elbows and blazed away with one gun, emptying it. He saw a man stop short on the edge of an abuttment, flying his arms into the air and slowly tumble over the edge, his body arcing out into space, the ringing sound of his scream of anguish, a soul-chilling thing, as it echoed up and down the hollow canyon.

For a moment after that, there was nothing but silence. "Who is it?" Lola wondered, tremulously, reloading the empty sixgun Jardine handed to her. "Somebody must have followed us, are after the gold."

"Reckon so," Jardine agreed dryly. "And I got an idea it's that hulking blond barkeep of Bea's, the man who butted into our conference, yesterday, the man she called Wolf Conrad. He must've overheard part of the conversation, learned what we were up to, and followed us out here, with a couple o' his cronies, this mornin'."

"That must be it," Lola said. "Nobody else could know. And we left town this morning before anybody else was up, hardly."

As if in answer to their wondering, a deep voice suddenly rang out. It said: "Yuh might as well th'ow out your irons and come out into the open with your hands raised. We still outnumber yuh, three tuh two!"

"It's Wolf Conrad, all right!" Lola

told Jardine. "I recognize his voice. And that must be Sid Bogart, Cal McMasters and Wick Rogers, with him. Those four have always hung out together. Wolf is a bartender at Bea's place and the other three work there as bouncers. They're a tough crew, Nick. Maybe we'd better do as they say."

"We wouldn't stand a chance," he growled back. "They'd gun us down, pronto. No, kid, our only chance is to fight 'em off—or die tryin'."

With that, he raised one of his guns and pumped two shots in the direction of the voice. There was a muffled oath from one of the hiding spots on the cliff and then two more rifle shots whipped down at them. A slug whipped up gravel next to Jardine's face, where he was sprawled on the ground. He felt Lola hug up closer to him.

FOR SEVERAL minutes, then, there were no more shots. Jardine, watching the place on the canyon cliffs from where they were being ambushed, saw a stooped figure scurry out from behind a rock. He snapped a quick shot but saw the bent figure keep going and knew that he had missed. He kept watching and saw that same shadowy figure emerge in the clear for a flashing moment again, but not long enough for him to get in a shot.

"We're liable to be in real hot water, soon, honey," he whispered to Lola. "One of them made a break. The way he's moving, it looks as though he's aimin' to get behind us. We'll be caught in a crossfire, then. We'll have protection on only one side. I think I got another one of them before. If so, that leaves only two against two. But we're still at a disadvantage, because they're up high and with more cover. We're stuck down here where they can pot at us from any angle."

"Isn't there something I can do to help, Nick?" she begged.

He turned around and looked at her. Her face was very close to his and he saw no fear in her dark eyes. Serious concern, yes, but none of the panic and terror that some women would show in similar circumstances. Her little jaw was as set and determined as his own. She looked like the most beautiful thing in the world to Nick Jardine at that moment.

"Lola," he suddenly blurted. "This is goin' to sound loco as all hell t'you. I dunnon whether everything that's happened has made me blow all my buttons or whether it's the fever comin' back on me. Anyhow, everytime I look at you I get weak and dizzy. I reckon I'm just plumb off my roeker over you, Lola. I want to tell you right now, in case we never get out of this tight. You understand, Lola?"

She nodded. The ghost of a smile played about her young lips. Her eyes moved over his face like a caress. "I understand, Nick," she said, levelly. Her hand caught his wrist and squeezed it tightly.

To cover up the sudden surge of emotion that ran through him, Nick said, now. "We've got to outfox these piratin' coyotes up there on the rimrock. We can't let them get us between a crossfire. There's only one thing to do."

He handed one of the six guns to Lola, along with a few extra cartridges. "The way we're set up behind this rock, that hombre up yonder, in front of us, can't see us, if we stay in a line with this rock. You're goin' to set here and keep pottin' away at him. I'm goin' to move back, keepin' in line with this rock and meet that skunk who's tryin' to get into position behind us, half way. It's our only chance."

"All right, Nick," she breathed. Her hand squeezed his arm again. "Be careful. Please, Nick."

"Sure. Sure I will," he told her. He bent his head and let his lips brush hers in a quick, impetuous kiss and then he started to edge off backward, away from her, always crouched, and keeping the rock in the line of vision between himself and the owl-hoot up front.

IT TOOK him a long time, and every once in awhile, he heard a rifle slug go whistling down the canyon toward the rock where Lola was. For an instant his heart would stop

cold, fearing that she had been hit. But then he would hear the answering shot of his own sixgun and knew that she was still all right. He would move on.

At length, he reached another cluster of rocks, near the base of the canyon wall. Once behind this, he was able to stand erect, without being seen and make a wild dash into a deep crevice. There were foot and hand holds up the side of the crevice that helped him to climb swiftly and surely. He kept going until he felt that he was at a point where he was above the man trying to sneak up on their rear. He waited a moment, getting his breath and his bearings.

And then he spotted the other man, off to his left and below him about a hundred feet. The man was setting himself up, bracing himself on a narrow shelf of rock, in a perfect position to gun down on Lola, far below, lying prone behind her rock protection.

Nick Jardine started toward him, slowly, carefully, so as not to dislodge any loose shale. But every second was feverish with excitement and fear for him, for he saw this man, a tall, shaggy haired string bean of a man in a mackinaw coat, resting his rifle on a jut of rock and taking careful aim at Lola in the valley below.

He would only need one shot, Jardine knew; he wouldn't miss. Finally Nick made a ledge about ten feet above the tall man and just as the other was sighting along the long barrel of the rifle Jardine leapt. He hurtled down and landed full on the back of the outlaw. The other's rifle went skittering off the edge of the cliff into space, clanged to the bottom, several hundred feet below and went off, with a sharp crack of sound.

The man screamed as Jardine landed, but Nick clung tight with both knees, belabored the other man's neck and the back of his head with his fists. For a few moments, they wrestled back and forth perilously close to the edge of that tiny shelf of rock, first one on top, then the other. After a few moments, both squirmed free from the other and climbed to his feet. They faced each other there, with barely free inches between themselves and the sheer drop to the rocky floor of the canyon below.

The outlaw was wild-eyed and slobbering with fear and anger now. A steady stream of oaths poured from his curled lips as he swung a murderous blow at Jardine's head. Jardine ducked at the last moment and the first riffled through his hair and hit against the rock behind Jardine. Then Nick feinted with his left, turning away the other man's guard. He brought his right fist up from his boot tops. It had all the weight of his one and eighty rangy pounds behind it. It landed on the other man's lantern jaw with a sickening *thwack* sound.

The outlaw was raised clear off his feet. He sunfished backward and out into space. He was out cold from the punch and didn't utter a sound but Jardine could hear his body bouncing off juttings of rock, all the way down.

He stood there, getting his breath back, trembling for a moment. And then he heard a shot from the other point of ambush and quickly turned his eyes down to the place behind the rock where Lola was hiding. He saw her prone figure jerk and then, as he watched, she got up onto her hands and knees, one hand pressed to the side of her head. She half rose up to her feet and then fell headlong.

JARDINE STOOD there, horrified, a numbed feeling spreading through him, as he looked down at that still figure behind the rock, far below, its arms outspread, the sixgun no longer clutched in the small fingers.

And then he saw another thing. Wolf Conrad, who had shot Lola, had witnessed his hit. He had broken out into the open now, convinced, apparently, that Jardine had been taken care of by his partner, and knowing that he was safe from Lola. Jardine watched him scrambling down the side of the canyon wall. He realized that if Lola was only wounded, if she wasn't yet dead, Wolf Conrad would finish her off.

With a little cry, Jardine turned

back the way he had come. He retrieved his sixgun from the place where it had fallen, in his mad ascent before. He jammed it into his belt and started a swift, crazy climb down the side of the cliff again. He reached the bottom about the same time that Wolf Conrad did. Both men started their mad sprint toward Lola, almost simultaneously. It was a race for life.

Halfway to their goal, both men seemed to realize that the race was going to end in a dead heat. They both stopped at the same time, setting themselves, bracing their feet apart, whipping up their irons. They stood there, a hundred yards apart, with Lola prone figure between them, like two men in a formal duel, only their were no witnesses here, no formalities. There would be no medical attention for the one who lost.

Almost as one sound, both sixguns barked against the wild silence of the lonely canyon. Nick Jardine felt something tug at the shoulder of his jacket, felt a warm wetness running down his arm. But through the cordite-reeking gunsmoke, he stared, cold-eyed toward Wolf Conrad. He saw the short, powerfully built barkeep, his thick mane of yellow hair gleaming in the sun, folding, slowly, both hands clutching at his middle.

Slowly, every muscle aching, almost dizzy with weariness, Jardine started again toward Lola. He stepped over the twisted still heap that was Conrad. He reached Lola knelt beside her, his heart thundering. He kept saying: "You can't die, honey. Not now. Not when everything's over and all right at last."

And then his heart went to leaping wildly inside the cave of his ribs, as he saw her head turn. Her long tangled black lashes flickered for an instant and then those dark eyes were looking up at him dazedly. He saw then, dabbing, with the sleeve of his jacket at the little streak of blood there, that the bullet had only grazed her temple. He said a little prayer of thanks and held her head in his arms for a moment.

He helped her to her feet a moment later and she stood there, dizzily, leaning against him. Then, slowly, quietly, they started to walk down canyon toward the boogered burros, their arms around each other. The sun was warm upon them. High above them a crow whirled and cawed at them. And for the first time in as long as he could remember, Nick Jardine felt a strange, pleasant peaceful glow of happiness spreading within him. He glanced up at the blue sky and softly said:

"Well, Lola, it looks as though Satan's golden guns are going to bring happiness to someone, at last."

"Yes, Nick," she whispered back and held his arm very tightly and he knew that she knew what he had meant and that everything was going to be fine between them.

THE END

Another Powerful Novelet of

The Gold-Rush Days

BLEEDING GOLD

by T. W. Ford

Appears in Our Next Issue

Gunman's Prey

by T. W. Ford

(Author of "Vengeance Bound" etc.)

Joe Moodus had his trap planned down to the last detail—every one except the most crucial one!

JOE MOODUS could hardly believe his luck. Still half orey-eyed from the drinking bout he'd been on, he moved across the cheap boarding house room in his underwear. At the washstand he doused his head in the basin several times, splashed more water into his red-rimmed eyes, then faced his visitor again. The latter was a little tinhorn, a barroom tramp named Krager, an hombre who'd done time in the Big House. Moodus knew him back from the days when he himself was a deputy sheriff. Moodus spat over toward a corner then said,

"Now, let's have that again. And—straight, you packrat, or I'll nail your hide to the handiest barn wall!" He pinioned the little man by the shoulder. "If this is a trick to get a few dollars outa me—"

"No, Moodus, no!" little stoop-shouldered Krager squeaked, sallow face jerking with pain. "I tell you I saw him—Big Dick Hiller! It was him, Moodus. I seen him before, years ago. And I knew him. And—I swear it on a stack of Bibles—he's here—down at that crossroads place, *The Buckskin*,—just outside of the town... Why should I lie to you, Joe? I'm trying to do you a favor." He held out his hands, palms open.

Joe Moodus' light-blue crescent-shaped eyes narrowed took on a cold glitter. He began to pull on his clothes cutting his eyes to the window and the twilight beyond. His big hands unconsciously caressed the notched walnut butts of his hoglegs as he strapped them on. He was a towering man sandy-haired with a lantern jaw and eyes that were slices of shrewdness. He was the type who could grin at a joke and wear the same grin as he struck a gent down with a Colts barrel. He'd been a tough deputy sheriff once. But he'd been asked to turn in his badge after accusations of having accepted bribes from prisoners to withhold evidence against them. Joe Moodus always claimed he'd been wronged

"Well, I done you a favor, Joe," Krager whined, awaiting a handout of a few dollars.

"Maybe..." Moodus looked down at him coldly. "What makes you so sure it was Hiller? What did he look like?"

"Hell, Joe, like I said, I've seen Big Dick Hiller afore. He's tall an' flat-bodied—an' he's left-handed, I noticed. An' he's got that big long nose. Then, when some pilgrim down the bar, not recognizing him, mentions his name, Hiller goes stone-faced and watches the gent in the bar mirror. See? An' he never smoked a quirly down, just taking a few puffs and throwing it away like Big Dick always did. See? It's him, Joe."

Moodus plucked a half-smoked stogie from a pocket and gnawed on it. It didn't seem possible that the killer, a deadly gunslick, hunted now by the Law, would slope into a pueblo in the open. "How about his mustache?"

Krager grinned slyly. "That was what made me sure. He'd shaved it off, see, as a disguise."

THAT WAS the convincer to Moodus. That explained why the wanted man had dared to appear at a whiskey mill near a small town. He

Hiller wasn't being taken by surprise . . .

picked up his sombero, headed for the door as if Krager no longer existed.

"Say, ain't you going to give me nothing for tipping you off, Joe?" the latter complained.

Moodus looked at him as if he'd spit. "I'll take care of you later, Krager. And stay outa the way now, Sabe?" Then he blew out the light and clumped down the stairs as if the tinhorn had never existed. Moodus turned down the side street to the main drag with long heavy strides, thick shoulders hunched in thought. This was a wonderful piece of luck, to have the hairpin he and his bounty hunters had sought in vain walk in on them. But Joe Moodus was neither grinning nor celebrating in advance. Big Dick Hiller was a *muy malo* hombre when anybody or even any bunch threw a gun on him. A tough trigger-slamming product of the Washita country. He would never surrender, and he'd be tough to take. Moodus, from the start, had decided the best way to do it would be to get him dead.

Hiller had done time once, had been entangled with the Law on several occasions. Usually he managed to clear himself. He'd proven after many gunfights, often fatal to the other party concerned, that he had acted in self defense. But recently, in a bank holdup across the state, he'd gone too far, slaying a teller who didn't obey fast enough. And now they were out after him as if he were a mad dog. There were rewards totalling more than six thousand dollars on his head, the terms were dead or alive.

Moodus usually worked now as a houseman in a honky-tonk down in Prescott City. The word was that Hiller had escaped the lawman pack after him. Then an old acquaintance from his own John Law days, an ex-owl hooter, had dropped into the honky tonk, needed some dinero, and passed him the tip that Hiller was holed up up to the north. And that he was going to try to slip through Crazy Woman Pass in a break for the Border.

Even Joe Moodus' enemies had never called him stupid. They said you had to count your fingers after shaking hands with him. Some even claimed Moodus was the breed who'd stab a horse to steal his blanket. So Joe Moodus had put his shrewd mind to work, come out with a plan. Of course, he could have and should have turned over his information to the Law. But then he'd only be likely to get a small bit of the reward—if any. Moodus didn't play cards that way. No.

Instead he'd lined up the other four, and they'd taken the trail up toward the pass to get Big Dick Hiller and the reward themselves. Moodus had been hopeful. From his past as a lawman, he had scources of information, gents inside and outside the Law who would give him a tip if they'd cut Hiller's sign. Crooks and gunslicks who'd have to talk because he held something over them. At the Pass, though, he found almost beyond a doubt that Hiller had not gone through. They passed on and to the north—spent a week scouring the country, talking to scources. Once Moodus had gun-whipped a breed half to death because he thought the hombre was holding something back. But it had been a fruitless hunt. Today they'd cut into this pueblo, Hickory Forks, ready to give up. Moodus himself had gotten orey-eyed. But now—now—

HE TURNED down the main line of the somnolent little range town, entered the dingy barroom where he'd left the other four. Leatherfaced tall, lean-and-sleek-as-a-snake Tobe Powers was there at the end of the bar all right. Sucking on a dead quirly as usual as he stood staring dead-eyed over a half-emptied drink. Moodus would have bet it was the same one he'd left him with. Powers hated to do anything that cost him dinero. Powers nodded slightly.

Beside him was Little Andy with the shrivelled-up face as the result of the fact his lower jaw was toothless. He looked like an old gnome beneath his huge flat-brimmed sombrero. Nobody would suspect that he had spent years running rustled wet ponies across the Rio. He was wagging his jaw a mile a minute to the bartender, telling him what a wire-tough hombre he was.

Moodus looked around for the other two, Gunny Thomas and Samperfield. Samperfield he saw sitting at the table in the back with a travelling drummer who was buying the drinks. Big handsome Samperfield was a card at picking up an acquaintance and inveigling him into buying the drinks. Samperfield at such times always posed as a big cowman. Actually, back in Prescott, his dancehall wife supported him. Moodus' mouth darkened and drew down at the corners as he saw Samperfield's head wobbling with that foolish grin, a sign he was fast getting orey-eyed.

Four strides and Moodus was over him. "Sampy" Samperfield looked up, and Moodus' open hand smacked him over the jaw. Samperfield cursed and pulled away. He was none too nervy, but was a natural-born deadly accurate shot. Moodus called him a name and ordered him over to the bar. When they got there, Moodus

called for a glass of water. He picked it up and threw it full in Samperfield's face.

"Now try to sober yourself up,you dumb gopher!" Moodus wheeled on Little Andy when the latter asked what the hell was the matter. "Shut your head. And where's Gunny?"

Andy thumbed toward a backroom and said Gunny Thomas was asleep. Moodus said to get him. Andy looked worried. "Mebbe you better come along with me, Joe." He led the way back. It was a cubbyhole where the swamper of the place slept.

Stringy Gunny Thomas lay half on and half off a messy unmade cot, snoring heavily. The room was redolent of whiskey fumes. When the coldly angry purposeful Moodus shook him, Gunny half opened his eyes.

"Whush matter?" he asked thickly.

Moodus kicked him in the leg. Gunny yelped and sat up awkwardly, then fell back soddenly against the wall. It was plain he was too orey-eyed to be of any use that night. Moodus hauled him up by his vest front and prepared to drive a fist into his face. Then a thought, that, somehow had not occured to him before, struck him. There was no time to waste. Big Dick Hiller might light out any minute. There was nothing to keep him down in that barroom at the crossroads. Moodus walked out of the bedroom. Back at the bar, Tobe Powers asked imperturbably:

"What's the matter? You got one of your worthless tips again?" He had put up the dinero for this bounty hunter expedition.

"I just had a little parley with a gent who saw Big Dick Hiller about two miles from this spot, you lunkheads! Let's ride!"

GOING down to the livery stable on the quiet street, Samperfield brought it up first. "They's only four of us now with Gunny missing." There was the hint of a quake in his voice.

Little Andy stopped walking. "That's right. Hell! And Hiller might have a friend or two along."

"Come on," crackled Moodus. "He was riding alone when they almost caught him up to the north."

But there was a reluctance now. Tobe Powers said maybe it might be better to trail Hiller for a couple of days till Gunny was in shape to fight. Moodus spat into the gutter.

"Like trying to trail a snake through tall grass. Come on!" He led the way past the little barroom next to the alley leading back to the livery barn. A man came out the batwing doors. Moodus glanced in as they flipflopped. Then he hauled up short. The stocky man at the counter in there, broad as a barn door, was Ed Fertig, a hired gunfighter he'd known years back. Ed was a coldblooded lump of a gent who'd take any kind of a chance with a hogleg if the price was right.

Moodus told the others to wait outside. "Mebbbeso we'll have our fifth man." He went in. There was only the barkeep, Fertig, and a skinny man drowsing at the bar beside him. The latter plainly had looked at the bottle too long and too well.

Fertig turned a heavy broken-nosed face. "Why, Moodus, you big coyote! Howdy!" He didn't smile. He never did, Moodus remembered.

They shook hands. The drowsing gent on the other side mumbled, not looking up. His sombrero hung over his eyes. Moodus refused a drink and began to speak in a rapid whisper to Fertig. The gunfighter threw away his smoke.

"You sure, Moodus?"

"Plumb positive." They talked even lower-voiced.

"Big Dick Hiller! I can hardly believe he'd come in off the trail," Fertig said.

"He always was a nervy one. He knows no Law posse is in these parts." There was some haggling over Fertig's share. They finally agreed. Fertig downed his drink and they turned toward the door.

The skinny gent half staggered away from the bar and caught up with the two. "Don't do it," he whispered melodramatically. "Don't, I tell you." He gulped to straighten out his liquor-thickened voice. "I know

something. I—"

"You orey-eyed fool, get outa the way!" And the impatient Moodus gave him a shove that spun him into a nearby chair.

OUTSIDE he introduced Fertig to the rest. Little Andy had run into him before. They got their ponies from the livery barn and took the northwest fork out of the little town. A big lump of yellow moon was climbing over the hills. Suddenly Tobe Powers said a rider was following them.

The looked back. It was the little orey-eyed coot from the bar with his cream-hued sombrero, swaying in the saddle. "Who's your friend, Fertig?" Moodus asked.

Fertig said it was no friend of his, the man was a horse trader. Said he kept talking back at the barroom, saying as how he had been up Allenville way last night and that he had seen something awful. "He was afeared to tell about it, though," Fertig said. "Just a damfool idjiot, I reckon."

"Hell with him," Moodus decided. "He can't bother us."

They pushed on, going down the winding curve to the creek, wading its shallow yellowish waters. They crossed the flats beyond at a gallop till they sighted the crossroads where The *Buckskin*, a barroom that served grub to the stage passengers on the north-south road. Moodus swung them off among the sagebrush. They walked their ponies up onto the weatherbeaten two-story place. Lights shone from the ground floor windows, sprayed out onto the moon-dyed alkali of the trails. Behind the place a windmill creaked lazily in the soft night wind.

They quit the saddles. Moodus with Little Andy left the others and went up the edge of the trail opposite the place so as to see in the front windows. Moodus licked his lips. Big Dick Hiller was there all right with only the mustache missing. He was standing midway down the bar that ran down the left side of the interior, that put the victim's left side toward the front doors. Which made it perfect. For it was well known that Hiller, as the result of an accident in his youth, was blind in his left eye.

The pair rejoined the others in the sage. Moodus made the decision quickly for they had discussed for days just how they would take their man, depending on the conditions under which they caught up to him. It would be the old trick of staging a mock fight to divert the man's attention. Little Andy and Powers would go in first, get down to Hiller's right at the rear end of the bar, buy a drink, then get into a sham argument over a supposed card debt. Be on the verge of drawing. The others would ease in then and start the play for the deadly gunman. Except Samperfield. He would be at a side window to cut down Hiller if he should see him busting out for the front or the rear. The big thing was simply to get him dead.

"Sure wish I had another drink," Little Andy said.

Moodus cursed hoarsely to mask his own nervousness. "Remember what we're going to make outa this, dammit!" He shoved Andy off.

THE THREE in the brush saw them go up the steps and in the double doors. After about ten minutes, the trio edged out. Samperfield went ahead down the road, passed the place, and turned in at the other side to get at a window. Just as Moodus and Ed Fertig, loosening guns in holsters, stepped out, a figure moved from the shadows of some stunted cottonwoods across the way. Moodus snatched out one of his cutters with incredible speed.

But is was only the little drunk in the cream-colored sombrero who'd tried to tell them something back in Hickory Forks. He advanced, still swaying, spoke up thickly.

"Don't do it," he began again. "I gotta t-tell ya something thash—th-thash very important. Ya donah know but Dick Hiller, he ish—"

Moodus stepped forward and smashed him one in the jaw that dumped him into the cottonwood clump again. "He must uh been

kicked in the head by a horse! Come on." They went down and climbed the steps. Inside there was yelling as Little Andy and Powers staged their sham wrangle.

Moodus slid his body through the doors, cut his eyes around in a flash. There was a white-headed limping barkeep. A fat man just past Hiller at the bar. Two other customers eating at a table over at the side. Moodus figured it would be just too bad if some of the innocent bystanders caught a piece of lead. He himself could always explain he was aiding and abetting the Law when he chanced upon a wanted man.

"You're a dirty polecat of a liar!" Little Andy's voice bounced against the low ceiling as he waved a fist at Powers. "You lost that dinero fair and square to me!"

"You was burning 'em off the bottom of the deck last night," Powers came back heavily, hand hooked on a holster. "You tinhorn!"

"No rat can call me that!" yelped Andy. He leaped back, hand inching down toward a gun butt hesitantly.

HILLER was turned a little toward them watching. And remembering that blind left eye, Moodus got his great idea. If he could catfoot up smack behind Hiller and ram him in the spine with a Colts muzzle, there would be no lead slinging, no danger of getting hurt. Even Big Dick would have to surrender then. He advanced softly, working out his hoglegs slowly, not wishing to attract attention by a sudden jerking motion that would be reflected in the mirror.

"I'm a-going to give you a window in the skull!" Powers was saying to Little Andy. "I'm a-going to—"

Then the voice of the little drunk bleatered from the door behind Moodus and the squat Fertig: "Don't do it, I tell ya... I know whash happened up Allenville way lash night an'—"

Maybe it was that that made Hiller half turn his head. Moodus, cursing under his breath, hooked up his guns, certain that Hiller still could not see him with that bad eye. And then it was like lightning out of a clear blue sky. A gun swished up in Hiller's right hand so fast Moodus could barely follow it, and the tall flat-bodied man in the rusty black was riding that trigger.

Lead ripped the sleeve of Moodus' shirt. There was a crash about the spatter of gun thunder. Squat Fertig went slamming past Moodus on the floor, part of one side of his head shot away, dead. Steel stabbed into Moodus' left calf as he fired wildly and frantically, stunned by the turn of events. He threw himself for the cover of the front corner of the bar. Made it because Hiller, slick as slob-

bers, had whirled, guessing the sham wrangle between Little Andy and Powers was a trick.

Moodus knew it was play it through or die now. Once a man drew on Big Dick, the killer didn't halt until he'd left him for dead. Moodus peeped up over the top edge of the bar, squinted through the gunsmoke as the place reverberated with the staccato smash of the gun explosions. Then he sighted tall Tobe Powers down at the rear. Powers was pinned against the side wall, clawing at a chest rent open by two slugs dead center. And little Andy was diving for a door at the back. Finally Moodus picked out Hiller crouched low at the other side of the long room.

Moodus threw a shot, ducked. On his knees, against the wall, he waited, knowing Hiller would come for him. Vaguely he tried to figure it out. Yes, Big Dick Hiller was supposed to be snake quick, deadly. But this man out there was a walking dose of death. Moodus tried to pray, to pray that Samperfield would pick him off through the window. Then he spotted Hiller coming out of the smoke haze beyond the end of the bar from the other side of the room. Coming with a snaky weaving pace. And coming so damned fast!

Moodus pumped lead. He got a glimpse of a slash opened on the tall man's cheek. Then the two slugs poured into Moodus' belly, and he was sitting half propped against the bar. Like something in a distorted dream he saw Hiller whirl and jump for the front door. Moodus wanted to guffaw. Now Samperfield would cut him down from the side and—

But Hiller, sharp as a wolf, halted just inside the doors, crouched, pushed one open. Barked at the figure of Samperfield dimly visible off to the left of the place: "Shed the gun irons or I'll drill you!" Hiller had sensed the trap awaiting him outside.

And Joe Moodus caught the thud of Samperfield's boots as he fled down the road. Then the blackness descended over Moodus...

He realized he was dying when he regained consciousness. He was propped in a chair and the white haired bartender was working a drink down his throat. Moodus pawed at an empty holster and tried to rise before the pain in his blood-leaking guts warned him. Terror was a cold claw squeezing his heart.

"Where—wh-where is he?" he gasped out.

Somebody said Hiller had gone. His stage had come along right after the shooting. Moodus choked on the whisky and squeezed his hands against his belly wounds hard. He still couldn't figure it out. Hiller had seen him, had even been shooting before his right eye had come around.

"I tried to warn ya, mister." It was the little drunk in the big white hat again. Only he was sobered up pretty well now.

The bounty hunter cursed him. "Tell me wh-what?"

"That that wasn't Big Dick Hiller. Big Dick died up Allenville way last night." He chattered out his story. How he'd stopped off at a deserted barn on the trail last night to bed down and run smack into Big Dick Hiller and another man there. They wouldn't let him leave lest he talk. And then, later in the night, another man, another Hiller, Big Dick's cousin, had ridden up. There'd been a terrific wrangle which he couldn't help overhearing, something over a woman. Aand there'd been the gunfight, Big Dick and his pard against the cousin.

"This cousin," the little gent went on, "shot 'em both down dead... I saw it... He was faster'n Dick himself, so good he whipped 'em both at once. He looks like Dick's own brother, 'cept he has no mustache. His name is Elly Hiller.... Dang it, mister, I tried to tell ya."

Moodus sagged deeper in the chair. feeling the cold death climb up his body from his entrails. *And Elly Hiller wouldn't be blind in his left eye, of course,* he told himself bitterly.

"Mebbe I—I could uh got Dick —if—if it'd b-been him," he mumbled. Then his own eyes began to go blind...

Owlhooter's Brain Bondage

By Ralph Berard

(Author of "End of the Primrose Trail" etc.)

Once, he had made a bad mistake, and that was on Doc Reynolds' conscience, still. And now it looked as if he would have to pay a heavy price for his past.

NOBODY in Racing River knew about Doc Reynolds' backtrail. He was a quiet man with rugged face and square chin. A soft, friendly light habitually shone in his grey eyes. A streak of premature grey, like a cow-lick, ran through his dark hair from the forehead. No one remembered that streak of grey had come in around the scar a bullet had

left ten years before. Few suspected he was under thirty. The doc looked older unless one knew him well, like Mary Kellogg did, for example.

It was dark outside, a stormy night with rain driving hard against the frail wooden building which housed the young doctor's office. He sat at a battered desk reading by a yellow oil lamp. The blind was drawn, shutting off view of his angular silhouette from the muddy street. The flood-swollen roar of Race Creek reached him without him heeding. Doc was absorbed in a book about medicine.

A six-gun lay in the drawer of Doc's desk; there was a pearl-handled revolver in his little black medicine bag and a derringer in a holster under his arm. Doc Reynolds was never without a gun handy.

The driving rain and gusting wind muffled hoofbeats of a horse that stopped outside. Doc couldn't hear the boots which crossed the wet board sidewalk. The knob of the door turned and the unlocked panel was flung suddenly open without the courtesy of the intruder knocking.

Doc's hand flashed instinctively toward the derringer under his arm. Frad Kennedy had been released from Deer Lodge two weeks before; this looked like show-down.

The man who entered was tall, powerfully built. A white scar at an ugly slant across his forehead reflected the lamp glow whitely, in ghastly contrast to the sickly yellow prison pallor of his face. A humorless grin contorted the ex-convict's features and his eyes seemed to look through and beyond the doctor, as if there were some extensive background between Reynolds and the drawn blinds at the window.

Kennedy reached out with the toe of his boot, hooked a chair toward himself. He sat down, still grinning contemptuously, but making no move toward the heavy gun on his hip. "Put up the hardware, Doc," he said evenly. "I don't intend killing you tonight. You deserve to suffer a while longer, you dirty double-crosser." The ex-convict gritted his teeth on the last word. His eyes glowed with ill-hidden fire.

Doc pushed back from the desk. His hand came away from the derringer. "I never double-crossed you, Frad; I've tried to explain what happened."

"Hombres like you always want to explain." Kennedy stretched his legs, relaxed in body while his face became even more contorted with hate. "I got myself a job here in the valley. Jake Kellogg's the softy, big-hearted kind. I'm riding at his Y-B Spread. It didn't take long to pick up the gossip about you being sweet on his daughter, Mary. She's a right attractive little filly. I like her myself."

Doc Reynolds' body was tensed. He half rose, his hand slipping a little toward his armpit again, then coming away.

Kennedy stood up, "That's all for now, Doc." He laughed his dry laugh. "I never thought the punk kid that helped me pull a stage hold-up ten years ago would be a sawbones when I got out. Just wanted to stop and confirm that I'll keep that vow I made when they locked me up. I intend killing you, Doc, but ten years has made me cautious. I'm not going back to Deer Lodge for murder. Maybe you'll be dry-gulched; maybe we can work up a gun fight over Mary Kellogg so I can kill you in the main street of town where folks see I was defending myself."

Doc's eyes had gone hard when Mary's name was mentioned. "I don't think you could murder me that way, Frad. The town wouldn't stand for it. I'm a respectable medico now; I don't carry a gun on my hip in a holster. Folks wouldn't call me a coward if I refused a challenge from you. They know you're a killer and they know I'm not. You got to think up something better than that."

Kennedy chuckled as he opened the door. "I'm not going to kill you right away," he repeated belligerently. "I'll wait till you want Mary Kellog real bad, then I'll see you don't get her." He stepped back into the storm, giving the door a quick slam behind his retreating steps.

DOC Reynolds sat entirely still a long time. This was Good Friday. Each Sunday morning for a long

time he'd taken Mary to church. This week would be Easter. The understanding between them was such that he should have asked her to marry him months back. He hadn't because he'd known something would happen when Kennedy got out of Deer Lodge; it wasn't fair to marry with death hanging over you. It wasn't fair to marry either without clearing up things like that old stage hold-up and the uncertainty about your parents.

Saturday was a busy day. Plenty of people were sick this time of year. Doc was grateful for activity: Constant work kept his mind off his problems and successful treatment of those who were ill always cheered him.

At nine Saturday evening he sat alone again, trying to study. A tiny, frightened-sounding tap came at the door.

Doc shoved back his chair, rose. Before answering, he took the six-gun from the desk drawer, turned his open book upside down over the gun on top of the desk. Then he said, "Come in."

Mary Kellogg stepped in quickly, quietly closing the door behind her. Her cheeks were even pinker than usual from the wind which had also eyes looked startled. Excitement permeated her whole body. Doc rose quickly, took her hand and pulled forward his best chair.

"Jim," she cried, "nobody knows I came. I shouldn't have come but I had to. You can't take me to church tomorrow morning, Jim; you mustn't come for me."

Doc pulled his own chair toward her. He reached forward and took hold of her two hands. They were ice cold and he began rubbing them gently between his palms. "I don't understand, Mary. Tell me what's happened."

She hesitated, looked on past him, then resolutely raising her eyes, met his. It seemed as if she wanted to tell him how greatly she loved him and couldn't do that because he had never told her. Her little hands squeezed his. "I don't understand either, Jim. A new rider came to work for dad two weeks ago. He's a terrible person, Jim. He served ten years in Deer Lodge but you know my dad. Dad wanted to give him a chance. He seemed nice at first; he's a good rider and all the boys like him. But when he talks to me alone he talks like he's crazy."

Doc kept hold of her hands, encouraged her to continue. "What does he say?"

"He says terrible things about you. I tried to stay away from him but he told me today he was going to kill you. He claimed that you and he held up a stage together and he went to prison while you went free."

Doc braced himself for what he knew he must do. "What he said is partly true, Mary. He was a fool for telling you, though. If he *should* kill me, making threats to you would stand against him."

The girl shrunk away, her eyes opening wider, questioningly. "About the stage, Jim. Did you really...."

"There's plenty I should have told you. My mother died when I was sixteen. Dad had gone to California and a year after mother's death I got a letter from him. He and some partner of his named Sylvester had struck it rich. He said he'd be home in a few weeks, on a visit, but he never came. I wrote back to Sacramento where his letter came from but I never found anyone who knew anything about him."

Mary sat listening eagerly.

"After starving through a few years of hard times, I got discouraged. Finally, I landed a job driving stage on the Jefferson City-Brandon line. Frad Kennedy approached me one day. He said I looked like somebody he knew, then he frowned at me. His forehead wrinkled and he acted queer. I had a gold shipment next day and Kennedy said if I'd stop the coached, maybe firing a couple of wild shots when he leveled a rifle at me from a spot named on the trail, he'd give me half of what he got from the chest and I'd be taking no chances."

"You didn't do a thing like that, Jim?"

DOC took a deep breath. "I agreed that I would. I was young,

didn't know better. It seemed an easy way to make money and I'd been hungry...but then something different happened. When we left Jefferson City that morning, one of my passengers was a United States Marshal. I hadn't known who my passengers would be, and there was no way to warn Kennedy. When he held up the stage I tried to wave him back with gestures but right then the marshal started shooting. A bullet hit Kennedy but before he dropped his gun he tried to kill me because he thought I'd tipped the law." Doc raised his hand to his forehead. "That's where I got this grey hair. The marshal arrested Kennedy. When his wounds healed he was sentenced to ten years in Deer Lodge."

"Didn't Kennedy tell them about your part in tho hold-up?"

"He tried to but people wouldn't believe him; I didn't even have to deny it. Nothing I could say would help him so I kept still. I'd learned my lesson; I took up medicine and studied hard. It seemed to me like the good I could do for people would help make up for what I'd done wrong."

Mary smiled understandingly, slowly squeezed his hand again. "I forgive you, Jim."

Doc forgot himself. He kissed her, told her how much he cared, asked her to be his wife. Then, as she would have accepted, he held her off. "I shouldn't have asked you, Mary. You musn't answer till I know what to do about Kennedy. Does he annoy you?"

"Only by the way he makes threats about you. He wants me to go to church with him tomorrow."

Doc fell thoughtful. "You aren't afraid of him?"

"No."

"Maybe you better go." Doc paused again. "Kennedy's actions are queer. He's not always logical. Like him telling you he'd kill me. It was foolish and illogical to do that. It sounds like a man who bluffs—but Kennedy is not a bluffer. He means it."

Mary was looking at him in a puzzled way. Doc had become preoccupied.

"Yes....yes," he said slowly. "Go to church with him tomorrow. Your folks will be with you. It will be all right. Then come and tell me what Kennedy says."

The girl's face had gone blank and disappointed. "All right," she agreed stepping toward the door. "I'll do what you ask, Jim." She moved out and was gone before he could make sure she would be safe getting home.

DOC attended Easter services alone. In the afternoon, he rode to the Y-B and visited with old man Kellogg. When there was an opportunity, he stole a few words with Mary and found the girl's natural enthusiasm and happiness entirely blighted. "Kennedy treated me like a gentleman," she said wearily, "except....except...."

Mary stopped. Doc followed her eyes and saw Frad Kennedy watching them through a window from the ranchhouse porch. Kennedy's features were convulsed with hate. Mary cut off the conversation in a whisper as she turned. "He warned me that if I ever went any-place with you again he'd kill you then."

Doc clenched his teeth involuntarily. He moved directly onto the porch. Kennedy advanced toward him with a taunting laugh. Doc tried to control his temper. "I've let you intimidate me far enough," he told the outlaw in a low, tense voice. "I told you the truth about the stage deal but you wouldn't listen. I'm convinced your foolish talk about killing me is all a damn bluff. If it isn't a bluff come into town from the south tomorrow noon. I'll come along the main street from the north. Bring any kind of gun shorter than a rifle and start shooting when you're ready. I'm calling your cards."

Doc whirled on his heel immediately. As he stepped off the porch he heard an almost jovial laughing behind him. "I'll be there, Doc; you're damn right I'll be there. Anything to accomodate my old sawbones friend."

Doc mounted his horse. It had grown dark. The prairie breeze fanned his hot face as he rode back toward town. What he had done was insane; he knew Kennedy would kill

him. Doc had practiced with a rifle before he'd taken the stage job. He had never fired more than a few shots from a sixgun. Every ounce of his energy had gone into medicine. He was a damn good doctor maybe. As a gunman....he laughed at himself without humor. "I just signed my own death warrant," he muttered.

The next day dawned clear. By eleven the sun was unusually hot. Doc hadn't slept much. He wished he could spend the morning practicing with the sixgun but that would attract unwanted attention. No one in Racing River knew the challenge had been made. He was glad of that. He was glad Mary didn't know.

At ten minutes to twelve he strapped on the same old belt and holster he'd worn the day Kennedy had held up the stage. The gun he dropped into the holster was the one he'd had in his desk drawer. He broke the action, made sure it was loaded. Beyond that, he took no precaution. His actions, as he slipped onto the sidewalk, were like those of a man in a dream.

Doc walked slowly toward the north end of town. Strangely, he thought once, his mind was not on the shooting. He began thinking about the work he was leaving. Who would carry on for the sick people in Racing River when he was dead? There was old Doc Criselby, but Criselby was close to eighty. He never had been a doctor except, "sort of a horse doctor," as Doc Reynolds had often heard him say.

DOC reached the end of the street, walking very slowly. He drew out his watch. It lacked a minute of twelve. The street looked longer than he had ever known it to look. There was no sign of Kennedy yet.

Doc had a little time, so he sat down on the very end of the boardwalk and began wishing he hadn't been so damn hot-headed the evening before. "No reason for it really," he told himself. Kennedy hadn't harmed Mary. The fellow's crazy threats weren't dangerous in themselves. Yet, Kennedy was actually dangerous; Doc knew that. There was a strange wild light in the man's eyes at times. The way he laughed wasn't normal.

Doc looked at his watch again. It was two minutes past twelve. Maybe his watch was a bit fast. He usually kept it so.

He rose and faced southward, walked to the middle of the street and began moving along. Here and there some towns person walked along one of the sidewalks. A man came from Johnston's hardware store and crossed the street to the Crow's Nest Saloon. A long-legged cow-poke stopped on the sidewalk and stared at Doc. Why in hell was the young Medico walking down the middle of the street at noon? The cow-poke shook his head in bewilderment and went into the salon. Kennedy still was not in sight.

In the center of town, Doc stopped, looked at his watch, frowned. A little hope stirred within him. Maybe Kennedy wasn't coming; maybe Kennedy was afraid. It was a self satisfying thought.

Twelve-ten. Twelve-fifteen. Doc moved off the street and ambled toward his office. His watch couldn't be that much wrong. He paused to look at the big clock in Johnston's store. By then, it was twelve-twenty.

Kennedy hadn't shown up and Doc could hardly believe it. It was out of character because, in his heart, Doc Reynolds didn't believe Frad Kennedy was a bluffer. It was he, Doc Reynolds, who had bluffed. By the time he was back in his office, his temporary relief had passed. What had Kennedy said about making him suffer? What had Kennedy said about dry-gulching him? Kennedy was still holding him in fear and as long as Kennedy lived Doc could never feel safe.

He went inside and picked up his bag. He had calls to make on sick people. Only in work could he find any peace from the mental suspense which tormented him.

It was dark when he returned. He felt extremely weary but he sighed with some satisfaction. Mrs. Jessimy's fever was broken. The pneumonia was clearing out of old Peter Link's lungs. Doc smiled to himself as he let the door swing shut behind

him. He'd accomplish something already by not being killed at noon.

A horse clattered to a stop outside. Small clicking boots sounded on the boardwalk. Doc stepped to the door, opened it. Mary pushed almost into his arms. Her head went forward on his chest involuntarily. She sobbed briefly, as much as it seemed to Doc, with weariness and frustation, as with grief. "I had to come, Jim. I had to."

He took her inside and pulled out his good chair, but the girl would not be seated. "There isn't much time," she gulped out. "Doctor Criselby says he'll die if he's not operated on at once. There's concussion, a pressure on the brain or....She clutched at Doc's arm. "You'll have to come, Jim. You'll have to."

Doc tried to calm her. "What is it, Mary. Who's got a concussion? What's happened?

She faced him squarely then. "It's Frad Kennedy, Jim. He went to the corral about ten this morning. He said he had business in town. He's been in a hilarious humor all morning, like a man who's been drinking. But I know he hadn't been drinking. There's no liquor at the ranch."

Doc squeezed Mary's arm till it must have hurt. "What happened?" he demanded. sternly.

"We don't know, Jim. There was a commotion at the corral. Dad ran out and Kennedy was lying in the mud, his horse still on a rampage. He'd been kicked in the chest and in the head. Criselby says he hasn't once chance in a hundred. He tried to get me to come for you sooner but I wouldn't. I know how you feel toward Kennedy. I know how he feels about you."

SOMETHING froze inside of Doc Reynolds. His eyes had grown hard like that night when Kennedy had first mentioned Mary. He put his palm under the girl's chin and made her look into his eyes. "Y-you love him, don't you, Mary?"

The incredulity which swept her face was almost unbelievable. "Jim! Jim Reynolds! Are you plumb loco? Of course I don't love him, I loathe him. When he first got hurt I was glad. I said to myself, 'I hope he dies.' " She grabbed both Doc's arms and met his eyes squarely. "You can't just sit there and watch any man die when you know there's something you could do. You can't do it. Nobody can."

Doc pushed her arm away. He laughed, a wild surge of relief sweeping him. "Oh, yes—*I* can; I don't have to go and watch him die. I can sit here and let him die and I hope he...." Suddenly his eyes met hers again. Mary's mouth had opened half way in astonishment. "You hope he dies," she finished scornfully.

But Doc found he didn't hope that. He hadn't quite been able to say it. He became conscious of the clock ticking in the suddenly silent room. Tick-tock. Tick-tock. "The clock," Mary said with even deeper scorn, "is ticking a man's life away."

Doc turned toward the window. He looked into the darkness of the street. His tongue circled his mouth, wetting his lips. Suddenly he swung back toward her, grabbed up his little black bag. "Let's go, Mary. I hope we're not too late."

* * *

Back at the Y-B, Mary worked at the stove heating water. Old Doctor Ceiselby seemed untirin. Jake Kellogg brought boards and laid them across saw horses. They got Frad Kennedy onto this crude operating table. Doc Reynolds became absorbed in his work, forgetting the man whose life lay in the hands was his enemy, forgetting even that he was anybody at all. The thing he was working on became a mechanical machine of bone, muscle, skin, tissue and blood. He began talking to himself as he worked:

"This man's been wounded in the head before. And old wound even older than when the marshal shot him. This first one was made by some crude, rough object, maybe a boulder, maybe a sledgehammer...."

The top of Kennedy's forehead lay open now, the length of the long incision Doc Reynolds had made. Doc straightened a bit and whistled slight-

ly. "There's been pressure here before. The old blow fractured the skull and it must have healed pressing down toward the brain."

Seized with sudden determination, the young doctor cut deeper. His teeth were clenched, his lips tight, his eyes too strained and intent to blink. Maybe Frad Kennedy was going to die. Or maybe Doc could release that old preassure and make a different man of him. It was worth a chance. Doc wasn't talking any more, not even to himself. His every nerve was tense and strained. He was taking that chance.

IT WAS five days before Frad Kennedy spoke. He had opened his eyes once or twice before, only to close them again. Mary, her father and the two doctors had taken turns at the bedside although Doc Reynolds had also made calls on his other patients.

It was a cheerful, sunny morning when Kennedy opened his eyes the third time. It seemed hard for him to focus them on anything at first. Doc was suddenly conscious that both of Mary's hands were in his. They stood tense and eager with expectation.

A little smile came on Kennedy's lips. His face held a changed expression. He opened his mouth and seemed to try his lips, as if he hadn't used them for a long time, then he said quietly, "Who're you folks?"

Mary and Doc exchanged quick glances. Neither answered. Kennedy turned his head, seemed to be looking out the window. "I don't know where I am," he said. Then he laughed a little bit, an altogether different laugh than Doc had ever heard from him. "I know I started from California after a slide of rocks came down and killed my partner. It nearly buried me, too. I didn't get far after that. I started passing out on my feet. When I'd come to I'd be someplace else, though, so I must have kept going while I was unconscious. Finally, I went out altogether. I don't know how I got here. I don't know where I am."

Doc leaned toward the bed, mastering his inward excitement with a forced quietness. "Did you feel pain in your head?"

Kennedy's eyes lighted. "Yes the pain was bad. It would get almost unbearable, then I'd pass out."

"What's your name?"

"Jack Sylvester." His eyes saddened. "I had a swell partner, old fellow named Reynolds. We struck it pretty rich, then that damn slide came down on us and....well, it got Pete Reynolds. Nearly got me, too."

Doc straightened. His brows drew down in an expression of complete disbelief. This thing was entirely impossible. It couldn't have been his own father who was killed in a slide ....yet....why hadn't he heard again from his father? Turning to Mary, he said, "Can you get Mr. Sylvester a little broth now? He needs to gain strength."

Mary was looking at him questioningly. Doc realized she, too, was putting the puzzle together.

WHEN Sylvester was stronger, Doc began questioning again. "Where did you head for when you left the mine?"

"Some little town called Racing River. That's where my partner came from. He had a son there and I

thought...." Sylvester paused to smile. "It was pretty hard for me to think yesterday and day before, my head hurt so....I thought I'd look up this young fellow in Racing River. He'd be entitled to his dad's share in our claims maybe, if he was a good sort, we could go back together, clear out that slide and get back to work."

Doc stepped to a dresser nearby and returned with a mirror. "Take a look at yourself, lad. Don't be frightened. It's nothing that will hurt you."

Sylvester studied the mirror a long time. "Say," he looked up at last, "I look older. What happened to me?"

Doc took the glass, sighed as he put it back on the dresser. Coming back to the bed, he took up Sylvester's hand and shook it gently. "I'm Jim Reynolds. Your partner, Pete Reynolds, was my dad. You made it to Racing River. I reckon your subconscious mind helped guide you before the pressure settled on your brain from the bruising that land slide gave you. It's been twelve or fourteen years since you started that trek from California."

The next morning it took considerable more explanation before Sylvester would believe. Doc carefully refrained from mentioning the unpleasant parts of the story.

Mary stood close beside him at the bedside. "This is the girl who's consented to marry me," Doc told Sylvester. Mary stood very close now. Doc's arm was around her. He bent down enough to kiss her forehead. This seemed to please Jack Sylvester. With a surprising recovery of strength, he pulled himself higher onto the pillows. His eyes lighted with enthusiasm. "Say," he suggested eagerly, "you two get married, then we can have a real cook when we go back to work that mine. That was always the hard part for your dad and me. Cooking. We hated it."

"I'm afraid that mine won't be there now," Doc said. "It's been a long time."

"We filed on it," Sylvester insisted. "It's ours, half yours and half mine. I can hardly wait to get back."

Doc began to feel the urge of this new adventure. Turning to Mary, he asked, "Would you like California for a honeymoon."

She snuggled against him. "I'd love it," she said.

THE END

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Famous Western published bi-monthly at Holyoke, Mass., for October 1, 1947

State of New York }
County of New York } ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid personally appeared Louis H. Silberkleit, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the publisher of the Famous Western and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y., Editor Robert W. Lowndes, 241 Church Street, N. Y., 13, N. Y.; Managing Editor, Robert W. Lowndes, 241 Church St., N. Y. 13, N. Y. Business Manager, Maurice Coyne, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Columbia Publications, Inc., 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Maurice Coyne, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Harold Hammond, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

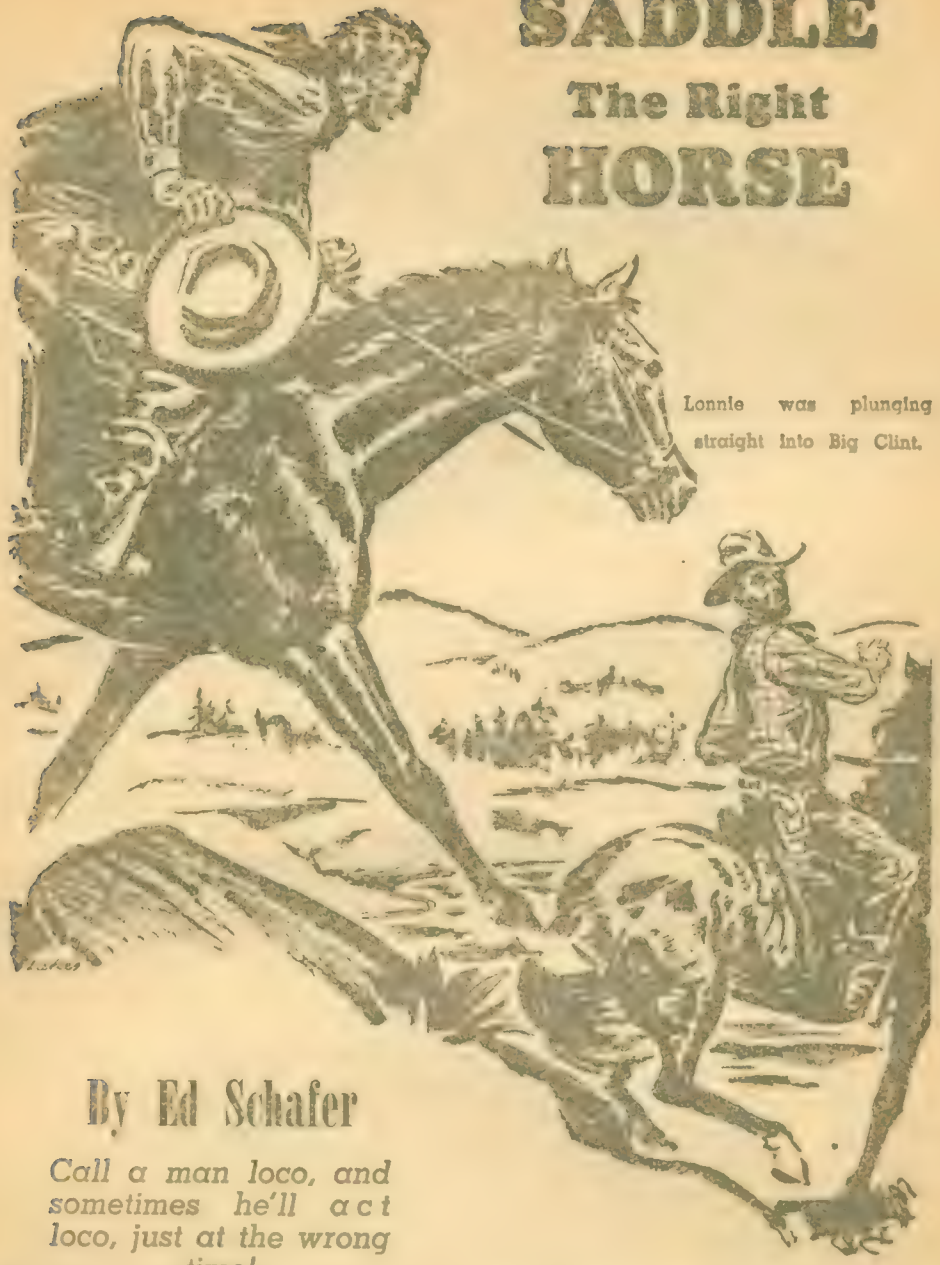
4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is—(This information is required from daily publications only.)

LOUIS H. SILBERKLEIT
(Signature of Publisher)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this [illegible] day of September, 1947. Maurice Coyne. (My commission expires March 30, 1948.) (SEAL)

SADDLE The Right HORSE



Lonnie was plunging straight into Big Clint.

By Ed Schafer

Call a man loco, and sometimes he'll act loco, just at the wrong time!

BIG CLINT Masterson reined in his cayuse at the head of Cottonwood Pass. His hand was heavy on the lines, and the skittery horse danced a few steps until the angry sawing brought him to a halt. Big Clint cursed and spat after the shower of stones that rattled to the bottom of the creek bed, fifteen feet below.

He flung irate words over his shoulder. "Lonnie! Hi, Lonnie, yuh locoed hombre! C'm over here, pronto!"

He did not turn his head at the sound of scrabbling hooves on the rocky trail. He waited until the

approaching rider had come to a smooth halt.

"Looka that, yuh blasted hammerhead! The crick's dry. You told me it was still runnin'."

"But that was yesterday." The whining voice was shaky with an undercurrent of fear. "It was running yesterday when I rode past. It's this hot spell, C-Clint—Mr. Masterson Come two-three days she'll be drier'n a cow bone."

At the stuttering use of his first name Big Clint turned and glared at the narrow-chested speaker. A slow, savage smile crawled over his thick features. He had Lonnie Clark scared six ways from Sunday. And if he could do it to Lonnie, he could do it to the other hombres in Lonesome Valley.

Cross Big Clint Masterson, would they! Nobody did that and hung around to brag about it. Let them set back in town with their tom-foolish Protective Association. Let them see what good it did.

"I offered to buy out their holdings," he snarled aloud. "Offered 'em a right good price. Now I'll starve 'em out. In six months this hull valley'll belong to Clint Masterson."

"Think they'll quit, Mr. Masterson? Think they'll pull out? Tom Myers, down in Lonesome, he says—"

"The blazes with Tom Myers! I don't give a hoot what he says. They'll hafta quit. Come two-three days the crick'll be a clay-bottom dust hole. 'Thout no water their scrawny cows'll die. No cows, no dinero. No dinero, no people. They'll hafta git."

He loosened his kerchief and ran it around the edge of his open collar. A speculative gleam crept into his close-set eyes. His voice was silky.

"How come you know so much about what Tom Myers was sayin'? Thought I told you to stay away from Lonesome since them so-called friends of yourn riz up and kicked you out."

HE SMILED sardonically. That was a good one, kicked out. Lonnie Clark had been the first hombre in Lonesome to break under Clint Masterson's whip-lash tactics. Folks in town had been mighty patient with Lonnie. His paw Deal Clark, had been one of the first men in the valley. He'd set up near the headwaters of Cottenwood Creek, and prospered nicely, until that line-riding "accident"—the accident Clint Masterson knew more about than any man in the valley.

They couldn't rightly blame poor Lonnie for selling out to Clint right after his dad's funeral. Lonnie had never been really acountable for his actions. He'd always been—well, sort of weak and slow-witted. Folks felt sorry for him and treated him kindly. That was what hurt, when Clint Masterson came along. Clint, the only man who ever came right out and called Lonnie plumb loco. To sell out was bad enough, but to take up with him friendly and go to work for him against his own people! It was more than decent folk could bear.

Lonnie's voice was defensive. "Had to go to town, Mr. Masterson. Needed a sack of flour. 'Sides, I wasn't rightly talking to Tom Myers, not since you told me not to. Just kind of overheard."

"All right, then. Jus' don't talk to him. Him and his tryin' to make you into a cow poke. Tryin' to teach you how to handle a rope. You ain't carryin' a riata now, are you?"

The scared youth shook his head.

"Wal, see that you don't, or I'll string you up with your own leather."

Big Clint laughed boisterously at his own humor. He spurred his roan gelding into a run and clattered down the arroyo trail in a shower of dust He didn't bother to look back. He knew Lonnie Clark would trail along behind, if he knew what was good for him.

His narrowed eyes studied the caked creek bed, spotted at intervals with slowly drying water holes. That had been a master stroke, to dam up the creek on his own land and turn the water away from its natural channel. Already the stubborn fools in Lonesome were beginning to feeel the pinch. They were getting desper-

ate for drinking and cooking water, and the cattle had to shift for themselves. A few more months, maybe only weeks, and the toughest one among them would be ready to turn tail and crawl for cover.

His lips curled in a silent sneer. The idea wasn't even rightly his. He had got it from Lonnie Clark, one of the town's own people. That was a laugh. He recalled the day Lonnie spoke up, right after he sold out and came to work for him.

"You'll never squeeze out them folks in Lonesome, not Tom Myers and that bunch. Long as there's a drop of water fiten to drink they'll hang on and fight you."

Even then Clint might not have got it, but Lonnie had gasped and clamped shut his weak mouth, like he'd been mighty upset at Clint's slow smile and thoughtful voice.

"Water, eh? Lonnie, yuh locoed galoot, you give me an idea."

That had been two months ago. There had been several nasty gun battles right after he damned up the stream, but Clint had a tough bunch of gun-totin' rannies working for him, and he figured on being able to hold his own when it came to shooting. Besides, he had the law on his team. The sheriff didn't like it, but he had to admit that Clint was within his rights in building a dam on his own holdings.

THE TRAIL narrowed suddenly and snaked between high rock walls. Big Clint Masterson leaned far back in the saddle as the nervous roan sat on its haunches and slid down the steep slope to Yellow Dust Pool. Or where Yellow Dust Pool used to be. Big Clint snorted in derision. There was now only a deep-gullied sink hole, hardly twenty feet across, the film of water no more than inches deep over the shifting bottom.

He saw the clean-picked bones sticking up from the mud. "So that's where my strays have been disappearin'. Allus kinda thought the pool was quicksand." Well, no wonder they had got stuck. Wouldn't do to fall in there. A man'd have a mighty trying time climbing out.

He perked up his ears at the sound of Lonnie's horse slithering down the trail. He kept his eyes turned to the pool because that best showed his contempt for the slow-witted fool behind him, but he couldn't help feeling a twinge of admiration. That Lonnie Clark sure could handle a

cayuse. Maybe he wasn't as bright as the next feller, but fork him over a a saddle and he could hold his own with anybody.

Take the way he was coming down that trail, now. Quick and careful. Put a clumsy, heavy-footed pony under his reins and, sure enough, that piece of horse flesh became as light and quick as a mountain burro. It was a trick Lonnie had. Like as not he'd come to a smooth stop beside Clint as easy as if he'd been cantering over flat grazing land.

A small stone from Lonnie's descent rattled past and plunked into the mud below. It sank with a soft sucking, like a thirsty waddie draining the last drop of red eye.

"Hi, hi, hi, hi ya-h-h-h-!"

The sudden yelling jerked Clint out of his reverie. He flung a quick glance over his shoulder. Lonnie was fanning his dancing cayuse with a dusty hat brim, and raking cruel, spur streaks in the pony's heaving sides. He crashed heavily into the flank of Clint's roan.

THERE WAS a wild moment of teetering. Clint sawed desperately on the lines, trying to pull his falling, pawing mount back from the edge. He went over, cursing, spitting sand, clutching wildly at rocks that tumbled past him in a noisy race for the mud bottom.

He hit with a loud splat that wooshed the breath from his body. He thrashed wildly as he felt himself sink into the sucking, oozing mud. He tried to shout; his mouth filled with water.

Then he touched bottom and the slow sinking was over. A throbbing tingle of relief poured along his arms and legs. He forced his head above water and stood chest deep in the sticky mud. A few feet away there was a frenzied thrashing as the roan fought out of the sink hole and scrambled back to dry land. Clint tried to follow, and the sick feeling was heavy in his craw when he found he couldn't move his legs. He was stuck. Stuck good.

He glared up at Lonnie's narrow, anxious face peering over the edge of the trail twenty feet above. "Lonnie Clark, yuh locoed idjit, I'll whale yore hide when I git outa here!"

"Now, Clint." Lonnie's voice was soothing. "It was an accident. The bronc took to bucking when he got wind of a sidewinder."

"Mighty funny my nag didn't git spooked of one. Wal, don't stand there gapin'. Toss me a line."

"Can't do that, Clint. Can't toss you a line. You know you never let me carry a riata."

Was there a sly grin on Lonnie's face? Clint couldn't be sure. But he noticed the use of his first name instead of the respectful "Mr. Masterson" he had drilled into Lonie's head. The heavy stone in his stomach doubled in weight.

"Then hightail it back to the bunk house and tell the boys. They'll come and pull me out."

"And if'n I don't, Clint? If'n I don't? They'll never think of looking for you here."

Lonnie climbed back on his pony. "Reckon I'll mosey t'other way, to Lonesome. 'Pears to me Tom Myers'll be mighty interested in knowing what happened." He rode a few steps, then came back. "I wouldn't worry none about that mud Clint. Come two-three days it'll dry into nice hard-baked clay. Even a locoed hombre like me can figger that."

He grinned, and his smooth voice was lined with silk. "It was an accident, Clint, just an accident—Like the one my paw had."

Big Clint screamed after the smoothly drumming hoof beats that died away down the trail. He screamed in rage and fear at the blazing sun that beat down on his uncovered head...."*Come two-three days the mud'll dry into hard-baked clay.*" Already in his imagination he could feel the cement-like pressure against his chest, crushing the breath from his lungs. He struggled frantically. Bubbling foam frothed on his lips. He screamed again to drown out the sound of Lonnie's voice.

"*It was an accident—like the one my paw had. Even a locoed hombre like me can figger that.*"

Medicine Joe triggered like mad but Thorny kept on comin'

The GHOST WALKS

by Cosmo Bennett

Thorny Lenten had to win a gunfight without guns!

THORNY LENTEN hung draped over the bar in the Half Moon Saloon when Pete Hamas came in and said, "Thorny, you'd better git."

Thorny annoyingly undraped his six foot frame and passed a cloud over that Roman profile of his.

He said; "Pete, I don't want to git. I like it here."

Thorny turned back to the bald-headed bartender who wiped a glass in that abstract manner of all bartenders in Cactus County or elsewhere who have to lend an ear to a customer's palavering.

Thorny had been relating one of the episodes when he had been really bad, when there had been a price on his head, when his appearance in Cactus or any like county would have meant scattering and shooting.

Right now Thorny didn't even carry a gun. That had been his understanding with Sheriff Beazley.

Sheriff said; "You've squared accounts with some right honorable acts. But if you're a aimin' to keep on the right side of the law an' settle down peaceful like you say, the best way is to keep that trigger itchy finger as far away from shooting irons as possible."

Thorny had chuckled and said, "Looks like yo're aimin' to make me a permanent resident all right—six foot under. By makin' me a walkin' target for any hooch-happy coyote who aims to proclaim he took a shot at Thorny Lenten."

The Sheriff frowned. "Them's my conditions."

And Thorny Lenten had said; "I'm a takin' them."

Pete Hamas pushed up to the bar, He said, "Medicine Joe just checked in at the Hudson House."

The Hudson House was a two story frame building run by a Mrs. Hudson and passed for the "Hotel" in Cactus County.

The bartender asked, "Who is Medicine Joe?"

Thorny tossed down a drink, but he frowned. He set the glass down.

"Medicine Joe is the hombre I was tellin' you about—or was I? Anyway, he is one coyotes out of the past who should have been pushin' grass long ago. Seems like he made some promise to shoot it out with me come the time when he was a figurin' on suicide—"

"That's why I say git," interrupted Pete Hamas. "Ain't gonna do you no good with Sheriff Beazley if you kill Medicine Joe."

Thorny continued as though uninterrupted. "Medicine gits his name," he told the bartender, pouring himself another drink and tossing it off at a gulp, "because he comes from the Dakota Bad Lands, or Smoke Lands, or something. There's breeds mixed up in him and he is highly superstitious and given to magic—"

"He's got a bum ticker," interrupted Pete again. "He knows he ain't got long before a natural death—"

"So that's why he come here to shoot it out with me," said Thorny. "He figures he gits me with his slugs, or he gits me in wrong with the law if I perforate him and neither way he ain't nuthin' to lose 'cause he is going to die anyway."

"Looks that way," said Pete. "'Cause he went to that young doctor what come on here and opened up practice and is courtin' Mrs. Hudson's daughter. And the doc put one of them rubber things on his chest and then told Medicine he should lie down and take a rest before he should do whatever it was brought him here. I know Medicine's got a bum ticker 'cause I mind a night on a trail. Moonlight and ghostly it was, and this pure white stallion comes like out of nowhere and Medicine he drops down like he was hit. And his gun is out and smokin' but his aim is bad and he don't hit the white stallion and Medicine he keels right over. I thought I had a corpse on my hands right there and that's how I come to know fust about his bad ticker—"

"Shut up," said Thorny. "You talk too much." Thorny blinked a bit and said, "Then again maybe you don't talk too much, Pete. Have a drink."

After bathing his tonsils Thorny said, "That Hudson House, it is right long side of the feed store. And I was thinkin' that feed store is just a one story building."

THORNY WENT out and after some time he appeared in the rear of the feed store. It was a hot, blistering and dust-choking afternoon and no one who could get an excuse to do otherwise was out of doors.

Thorny rigged up some barrels and boxes and soon had pulled himself up on the roof of the feed store. Thorny was saying to himself, *There's plenty of occasions when I had to get out of a room in a hurry so there is no reason why I can't double on my trail, so to speak.* .....

Pete Hamas knocked on the door and Thorny let him in.

Pete said, "I kept watch like you said. Medicine Joe is up and taking a few jolts of red eye for courage. I got a horse outside. You still got time to git."

"I'm not gittin'. One thing more I'd like you to do fur me, Pete. Could you kind of rassle up some excuse to have the young doctor on the street?"

Pete grunted. "Don't need no excuse. Word's got around the doctor might be needed. Boys found an excuse, though, to git the sheriff out of town—so if yo' are plannin' on him stoppin' gun play, yo' got another guess. Want the horse?"

"Nope," said Thorny, "I'm walkin'." He got up and started for the door.

Pete said, "Thorny—yo' forgot your shootin' irons."

Thorny shook his head. "Ain't got 'em to fergit. Promised Sheriff I wouldn't cary 'em, didn't I? Let's go."

Thorny Lenten went out into the middle of the street and turned down toward the Hudson House, walking slow. Immediately those having vantage points made sure these vantage points had extra protection from stray lead. Word was passed to Medicine Joe because he came out of the Hudson House, gun in hand.

Medicine Joe paused and then saw that Thorny ws striding purposeful like, so Medicine Joe got out into the street too. They moved towards each other.

"Reach," cried Medicine Joe.

"Ain't got nothin' to reach for," said Thorny grimly, and kept on advancing. "Forgot to reach two years ago an' got killed. You can't kill a ghost, Medicine."

Challenged, Medicine Joe whipped up his gun and fired.

Thorny didn't break step. The

(Continued On Page 89)

GOTHAM JOINS THE GOLD RUSH

A Story That Might Well Be True

By William Tenn

IN JANUARY, 1848, when certain breathtaking glitters of yellow were observed in the tailrace of a mill being constructed for Captain John A. Sutter of Californis, Thomas Arbuthnot Collins, a lanky freckle-faced youth, was employed as clerk in San Francisco.

Thomas Collins went to work on January 24th, the official discovery date,—and for quite a while thereafter without thinking any more about the Pacific Coast than was necessary to work on forms which would establish credit association with the new banks springing up in the territories so recently wrested from Mexico.

He was happy; he had a fairly good job which paid ten dollars a week for only six days of work; he had prospects of a raise to twelve, and perhaps, after a while, fifteen dollars. This would enable him to marry a young lady he had met on a vacation trip to Brooklyn.

Of course, being young, Thomas Collins occasionally regretted the lack of adventure in his life; he read the reports in Greeley's *New York Tribune* of explorations in Africa and pioneering in Nevada. He sighed wistfully—one was just as inaccessible as the other.

No, far better to concentrate on Greeley's masterful editorials on the slavery question, on The Free-Soil Party—this was an election year and Collins' employers were Whigs. If he wanted to get ahead, he had to keep up with the *important* events in the world.

Collins went to work and saved money to visit his girl again in May; the journey to Brooklyn was long and expensive. He was so happy to see her that it probably wouldn't have excited him one bit to learn that by then almost every Californian who enjoyed the use of at least one of his legs had taken up residence in and around the site of Sutter's Mill. No, sir, it wouldn't have excited him one bit—

While Central and South Americans, sailors and trappers, scrambled into the gold fields, the East and the Middle West shrilled on about their private affairs, completely unaware of the bonanza.

Slowly, very slowly, the fantastic news inched its way east along almost non-existent lines of communication. Rumors drifted into New York from seamen, from out-of-town visitors, that something spectacular had happened "out Californy way," but Collins was a citizen of the most skeptical city in the world.

Gold in California? He chuckled. That was like the immigrants sweating up out of the holds of ships that landed at the Battery, blissfully certain that they could live on what they would chip from the gold-and-silver paved streets of the metropolis. Gold stories were for hicks and suckers, said Thomas A. Colilns, who now was working in a bank near New York's Bowling Green.

He knew about gold, and how little of it there was in the country. As a young man who wanted to rise in the banking world, he read the commercial notes on *The Tribune* very care-

fuly. As late as September 6th, he had read this latest report:

"We learn from a return made to the Treasury by the Director of the Mint that the deposits of gold derived from our own mines for coinage have amounted from 1824 to 1847 to about half a million of dollars per year. The gold-yielding states, named in what would seem to be the order of their productiveness, are North Carolina, Georgia, Virginia, South Carolina, Alabama and Tennessee. The annual product...appears to be very irregular."

No, if Thomas Collins wanted to be a rich man, he had to work hard, get regular small raises through the years and save his money. With luck, he might have a thousand dollars in his own name by the time he was thirty. This he might invest or use to start a smal business. Dull? Yes, but he was a lot better off than many people he knew.

On Saturday morning, September 16th, Thomas Arbuthnot Collins opened his *Tribune* and read something that made his security and careful plans turn to slippery mud under his feet. Under the subdued headline "CALIFORNIA — TWO VIEWS OF IT," were a pair of letters from the western territory.

Collins read the shorter letter first and smiled over its description of the beautiful "females" in California. Then, he glanced carelessly at the other—a reprint of a message to the *Philadelphia North American* from someone whose initials were W. C.

There was a paragraph about mining—quicksilver or mercury seemed to be plentiful out west—, and there was a mention of—of—!

"But a recent gold discovery has thrown all others into the shade ...particles of gold—resembling in shape snow flakes. A person will collect...from one to two ounces of gold a day. There are probably now not less than 5,000 persons, whites and Indians, fathering this gold. San Francisco, Sonoma, Santa Cruz and San Jose are literally deserted by their inhabitants; all have gone to the gold regions. The farmers have thrown aside their plows, the lawyers their briefs, the doctors their bills, the priest their prayer books, and all are now digging gold. The diamond-brooched gentleman and the cloated Indian work side by side, lovingly, as if they had been rocked in the same cradle...."

THE BANK clerk wiped some moisture from his upper lip and clenched the paper more tightly. All about him, on narrow downtown Broadway, other men had collected in little groups around *Tribunes.*

"A very large company left Monterey today for the gold scene—some on horses, some in wagons, some on foot, and some on crutches. As soon as the news reaches Oregon, we shall have a large emigration from that quarter. Nobody thinks of fighting here any longer—the natives have gone for gold, the sailors have run from the ships, and the soldiers from their camps. The last vessel that left the coast was obliged to ship an entire new crew...."

There followed a discussion of military developments, the need for civil authority in the new region and the suprisingly high beef and mutton production. The last paragraph, however, carried a mind-tingling after thought: "Your streams have a few minnows in them and ours are paved with gold!"

With difficulty, Thomas Collins turned the page and began reading the ediorial on the famine in Ireland; but after reading three meaningless sentences, he flipped back, went over the letter again.

There was an anecdote in it he hadn't noticed before: a man who had spent six days in the Sacramento Valley had washed out five hundred dollars worth of the yellow stuff

Five hundred dollars! Collins computed rapidly. Why, he only made five hundred and twenty dollars a *year!*

He found it very difficult to concentrate on ledgers that morning, even though Mr. Terman, the second vice-president, insisted that "one swallow does not make a spring," that these crazy booms had been started before by irresponsible newspaper accounts and that he, for one, was going to change to *The Evening Post.*

After lunch, Mr. Terman told Thomas Collins that Hagerty, the senior clerk, had resigned to go out west and hunt for gold. Hagerty's position would now be his, with a raise to twelve dollars a week, effective immediately.

Collins thanked the vice-president for the raise and went back to his desk envying Hagerty.

It was hard to go to sleep at night with the thought of all that wealth lying in the ground just waiting to be uncovered; it was hard to keep your mind on business matters. Collins tried to drive the thought of the precious metal out of his head, but all his friends, his landlady, his family, everyone he knew, talked about these days was gold. There was *gold* in California!

He went to see his girl in Brooklyn. She agreed with Mr. Terman that the whole business was just a wild rumor that had gotten out of hand. He was making twelve dollars a week now; he wanted to be especially sober and industrious. Very soon, they would be able to get married. But there was a faraway look on her face whenever she sneered at the mention of California.

Collins managed to work himself into his old routine. He disregarded the disappearances of friends, the sight of men plodding down to the harbors with a few possessions and precious digging tools on their backs. He read the much more conservative *Evening Post.*

Wednesday evening, September 20, 1848, was a hard day at the little bank near Bowling Green. People kept rushing in and withdrawing large sums for their accounts. Two of Collins' fellow clerks quit without asking for their pay. He knew that the *Tribune* had carried some sensational news that day, but he kept a tight grip on himself. He wouldn't read the ridiculous sheet.

He bought his *Evening Post* when he left work that night and stopped short in front of the building as he

". . . Ranches are deserted while their owners seek gold . . ."

saw the crowd of men arguing over their newspapers. He looked down at the first page of the *Post*. It reported the arrival of Edward E. Beale from Commodore Jones' squadron anchored at La Paz.

Beale brought new of what he called "the real, the new" El Dorado. He told of whalers on the west coast suspending operations, of captains sending their men off to the field bound by a promise to sell them the gold they mined at ten dollars an ounce—thus making a seven-dollar profit. He described the wholesale, frenzied evacuation of towns, the death of two newspapers as compositors dropped their mallets and charged off with picks.

Collins, who was gulping hard in spite of the quiet and dignified journalism, went on to Thomas A. Larkin's famous letter to the Secretary of the Navy—dated back in July—which Beale had brought with him.

> *"It is supposed that the banks and bottoms of all these small streams contain vast quantities of gold, and rich with the same metal. The people are now working at many places, some are eighty miles from the others."*

Larkin explained the simplicity of mining operations, from pan-prospecting to the simple dredges which were being built. The clerk heard a man near him exclaim at how easily it would be to build such a contraption, before he noticed—*"some small companies of five to eight men had machines from which they anticipate five or six hundred dollars a day."* The words glared up at Collins with all the brilliance of the future.

ALL THE way down Broadway, Collins saw clusters of men standing and discussing with a strange, urgent quality to their voices. *"Overland route's best—" "Sailor told me there was a bigger strike in another valley—" "How much is passage around the Horn?—" "Don't get one of thoses dinky little shovels—"*

Thomas Collins saw Vice-President Terman come pounding out of the bank, a wild look in his eye, a copy of the *Evening Post* under his arm. A man came up and read the dispatch over the clerk's shoulder, squinting in the deepening gloom.

They read of a Californian who had sauntered curiously into the gold fields, borrowed tools and returned home to arouse his clan with four hundred dollars to show for a week's careless work. Larkin estimated that ten thousand dollars a day had been taken from two rivers in a few days. He fired Collins' blood by his casual remark that *"The emigrants from the Atlantic states we shall have in October and December will soon swell the value of California gold that will be washed out to an unheard-of value."*

Collins and the man reading over his shoulder grew even more breathless at Larkin's opinion that the "Placer" would last almost half a century, as he described in detail the feverish downing of tools in every Californian pursuit in favor of mining. The last line of the letter was almost hysterical:

"In two weeks, Monterey will be nearly without inhabitants."

"Yes, but listen to this," the man behind Collins said loudly. He read the reprint of the *Washington Union's* comment on the letter—

> *"We have seen specimens of the California gold. As far as we have seen it, it does not appear in large lumps, such as we found the other day in a gold mine in Virginia, worth $550. Indeed, the largest pieces said to have been found does not exceed an ounce.—The specimens we have seen were in minute pieces, much resembling the scales of a small fish."*

"That doesn't make it so good, does it?" the man inquired, looking around.

There was no reply. Like so many other New Yorkers, Thomas Arbuthnot Collins had gone off to join the Gold Rush.

WILD WEST QUIZ

By Idaho Bill

See if you can answer these before you turn to page 97

1. In the wild and wooly west when it was said of a man that he had *cashed* or *passed in his chips,* it meant that he had
drawn his pay
died
given up and left the country

2. A favorite expression of cowboys for wet weather is
wet enough to bog a saddle blanket
wet enough to bog a steer
boot top weather
boggy and sloggy

3. In the days of the frontier west the customary weapon of a mounted man, besides the indispensible six-gun, was a
shotgun
rifle
an Express
carbine

4. *Stinker* has a use in modern parlance, but it originated back in frontier days. Its meaning was particularly applied to
a spell of bad weather
one who skinned buffalo that died in winter
a cowboy who refused to do his share of camp cooking
a bad horse

5. An outlaw steer is something to be reckoned with. Because of his wild, crafty, unsocial nature he is called, along the Southwestern Border,
an outlaw
El Diablo
Ladino
a cactus eater

6. The horse, when first introduced among Indians of the West, was called
medicine dog
caballo
running buffalo
crowbait

7. Queer as the old trapper was in looks and habits, his language was even more peculiar. His expression for death at hands of the Indians was
losing the hair
drilled
massacred
rubbed out

8. On the round-up, and when trailing to market, which of the following was most essential for the welfare of the trail crew?
Feather beds
Tents
Chuck wagon
One change of clothing

9. Back in the 1870's along the Rio Pecos in New Mexico, the *jingle bob* was the mark of ownership of Cattle King, John Chisum, and at one time decorated nearly one hundred thousand cows. What was it?
The ear mark
The brand
A sort of bovine haircut
A nose ring

10. The *wagon yard* harks back to an older, if not a better, day. It was really a
circle of the wagons to stand off Indians
sort of garage for wagons and teams
connecting rod for front and rear axels

Fighting Blood

by CHUCK MARTIN

(Author of "Rustler Sign")

Bill Black had lost what he needed to keep on fighting . . .

BILL BLACK knew that he had lost the race when his weary horse staggered and went to its knees. Burly Matt Dorn roared up in a deep-chested horse, made a running dismount, and took the fight to Bill Black with his maul-sized fists.

Matt Dorn was wide of shoulder and heavily fleshed from good living. Bill Black was slender and wiry, and almost starved. He made no play for the six-shooter in his holster, but he begged for mercy when a thudding blow caught him over his heart and knocked him to his knees.

"Don't hit me again, Dorn. I'm going like you said!"

Back in the buck-brush, a grizzled old-timer squinted down the barrel of his thirty-gun. His sights were fined on the broad chest of Matt Dorn, but Dan Logan held his shot when he heard Bill Black plead for mercy. His bearded mouth opened with stunned surprise, and brutal Matt Dorn lowered the boom.

Bill Black went down under a crashing blow which caught him square on the jaw. He lay on his back like a pole-axed steer, making no move.

Matt Dorn grinned wolfishly as he waited for some of life. Then he pulled his muscled bulk up in the saddle, spat contemptuously, and rode toward Sundown.

Old Dan Logan watched the big cattleman ride away, and he lowered his rifle. His weathered face twisted with anger and sorrow as he stared at the still form of Bill Black. Then the old cowhand came slowly out of the brush, crossed the grassy clearing, and went to his knees beside the fallen man.

"Rouse out of it, Bill!" he said petutantly. "First time in my life I ever knowed you to high-tail, or take slack jaw from any two-legged polecat!"

Bill Black shuddered and tried to sit up. He saw the shadow of old Dan hovering over him, and Black covered his face with his arms and shouted hoarsely.

"Don't kick me, Dorn. You've got the 2 B, and I'm quitting the country!"

Dan Logan reached down and pulled the pleading man to a sitting position. His gnarled right hand went back as though to strike Black, and then Logan's lower lips began to tremble.

This wasn't the Bill Black who had nursed him back to life when Dan Logan had been starved and almost dead...and wanted by the law. The cringing man before him was weak and gaunted.. almost starved. There was an expression of terror in Bill Black's gray eyes, and he fell in a limp heap when Dan Logan released his grip.

DAN LOGAN stirred strong beef broth in an iron kettle over his trench fire. A six-shooter was belted around his lean hips, and his Winchester was close to his hand as he watched the motionless form lying on a bed of pine needles just inside the door of a rude sod-and-rock cabin.

"Rise and shine, cowboy!" old Dan called sharply. "There's work a plenty, and time's a-wasting!"

Bill Black stirred and opened his eyes. When he tried to sit up, Logan gave him a hand, propped blankets

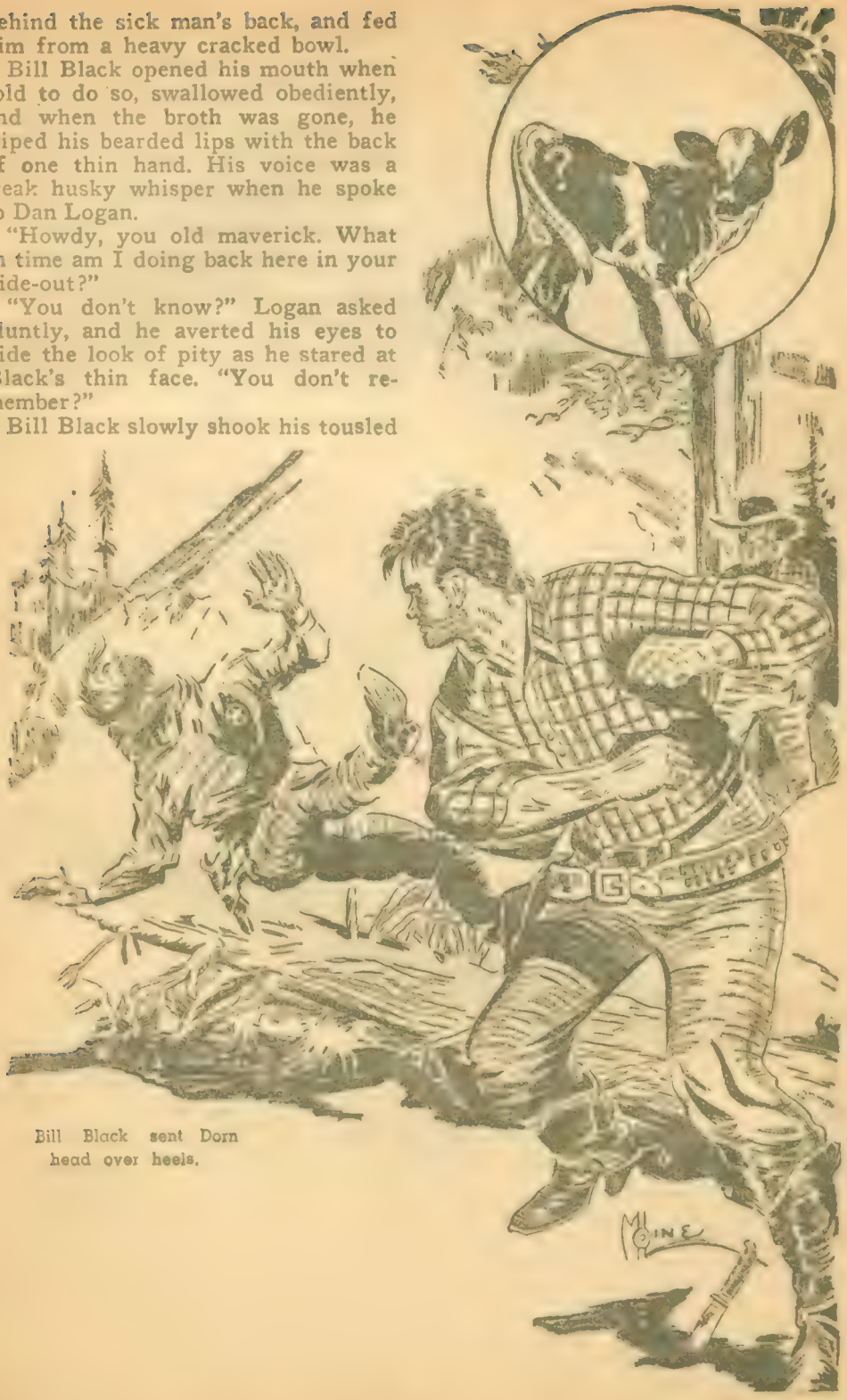
behind the sick man's back, and fed him from a heavy cracked bowl.

Bill Black opened his mouth when told to do so, swallowed obediently, and when the broth was gone, he wiped his bearded lips with the back of one thin hand. His voice was a weak husky whisper when he spoke to Dan Logan.

"Howdy, you old maverick. What in time am I doing back here in your hide-out?"

"You don't know?" Logan asked bluntly, and he averted his eyes to hide the look of pity as he stared at Black's thin face. "You don't remember?"

Bill Black slowly shook his tousled



Bill Black sent Dorn head over heels.

head. He was a bare skeleton of a man, wasted by fever and hunger ...weak as a newly-born kitten.

"You've been here a week," Logan said quietly. "You were out of your head with a fever, and your six-shooter and gun-belt were empty. You recall anything now?"

"Sick, you mean?" Black whispered. "I've been down on bed-ground with my head under me for a week?"

"Yeah," Logan muttered. "What about that 2 B spread of yores back there close to Sundown?"

Bill Black showed interest then. He jerked up, clawed at his hip where his gun should have been, and then sank back exhausted. He gulped a time or two, his lips trembled, and tears ran down his sunken cheeks.

"Matt Dorn liked to beat me to death, Dan," the sick man sobbed. "I owed him four hundred dollars, and he wouldn't wait until shipping time. Him and his crew kept me forted up in my cabin, and I ran out of grub and water. They burned down the shack, and Dorn caught me when I ran out!"

He shuddered violently and covered his face with his left arm. Dan Logan listened, gripping his rifle with his strong brown hands. He could hear Black sobbing as he walked down the trail from the little mesa where he had lived for three long years.

Dan Logan jumped a young steer in the brush, and his rifle barked spitefully. Logan walked over to the shot yearling, reached for his skinning knife at the left side of his belt, and he cut the steer's throat to bleed the carcass. Telling himself that he'd be damned if he and his were going to starve when there was meat a-plenty for the taking.

The old cowhand skinned out the carcass expertly. He leaned forward to stare at the brand on the left hip. He knew Matt Dorn's 88 brand, but there was something peculiar about this one.

Logan made a square cut and lifted out the piece of fresh hide which contained the brand. He held the square of hide up to the sun, studied it intently, and nodded his grizzled head. Then he cut a quarter of beef and threw it across his stopped shoulders, and returned to his make-shift cabin.

After hanging the meat in a little cooler in the rear, Logan saddled his horse and rode down to get the rest of the beef. He didn't want to see Bill Black for awhile, not until Black had stopped crying.

BILL BLACK pushed back his plate and sighed with satisfaction. He had just finished a thick steak, and the hunted look of stark terror had left his grey eyes. As he was rolling a brown-paper quirly with steady fingers, Dan Logan spoke carelessly.

"Two weeks since you've roused up out of that fever, Bill. You've been eating beef three times a day, cooked over sage-brush. You've put about twenty pounds of tallow back on yore ribs. How you feeling, cow feller?'

"Prime," Black answered promptly. "I can take it now, Dan. You mind telling an old pard."

"I've seen you fight with six-shooters, rifles, and then take to throwing rocks," Dan Logan said slowly. "I've seen you tie into three hard cases at one time when they caught you without yore hardware. Never knowed you to quit since you was big enough to sit a hoss without help!"

Bill Black listened and his hands began to tremble. Old Dan had washed his hickory shirt and faded denims while Black had been down with the fever, but the old clothes flapped on Black's spare frame to tell of his loss of flesh.

"I reckon I killed a man back there on the 2 B spread, Dan," he told Logan. "That means the law is looking for me, just like it is for you. I can't go back now!"

"One of Matt Dorn's gun-hung crew?" Logan asked.

Black shook his shaggy head. "This was a deputy sheriff," he answered. "He served a foreclosure on me, and seems me and him had words. He went for his gun, and I beat him to it. Used up my last ca'tridge, and

then Dorn and his crew had my shack surrounded!"

"You know this deputy?" Logan asked.

Bill Black shook his head. "Never saw him before, but he was wearing a star. Said the first thing he was going to do was to either catch you or kill you!"

Dan Logan listened and stared at his companion. Both were bearded and unkempt, but Dan Logan's beard and hair were almost white.

"I'm fifty-six next month," Logan said gruffly. "How old are you, Bill?'

"Twenty-eight," Black answered. "Why?"

"I've got twice as much experience as you have," Logan said thoughtfully, "You ought to have twice as much strength as an old mossyhead like me ...and twice as much fight!"

Bill Black inhaled deeply and his eyes squinted as he tried to read the old cowhand's meaning. Logan moved closer and stabbed Bill Black in the chest with a blunt fore-finger.

"Yo're yellow, mebbe?" he accused bluntly. "You get a mite sick, and your sand runs out!"

Black's thin face hardened, and his his eyes grew hot with anger. Then he sighed and looked away, slowly nodding his head.

"You might be right, Dan," he agreed listlessly."Something went out of me back there at my shack when the fire started. I'd been low on grub for days as it was, and I'd been drinking foul water. I stayed in that fire until it singed me, and when I ran out, Matt Dorn had me under his gun. I was out of shells and he knocked me down six times before I stayed down!"

"You whipped Matt Dorn once with your maulies," Logan reminded. "That was when I was working for you!"

Bill Black refused to meet the older man's accusing stare. He half-closed his eyes, ground out the stub of his cigarette, and shook his thin shoulders.

"Something happened to my cattle," he half-excused himself. "The last tally I made, I was running less than a hundred head, and mighty few shippers among 'em!"

"Something worse has happened to you, Bill," Logan said harshly. "You had five hundred head of critters when I was making a hand on the 2 B. How much do you remember after you jumped that crow-bait hoss and lit a shuck away from the 2 B?"

Bill Black flushed with shame. "Nothing," he muttered just above his breath. "I didn't remember anything until I woke up here in your shack!"

"You was starved, Bill," Logan said, and now his gruff voice was more kindly. "You were out of your head with fever, and you must have lost forty pounds. You want I should tell you some more?'

"Not today, Dan," Black said shakily. "I'm getting stronger, but the rest can wait. I'm going out to sit in the sun."

Dan Logan waited until Black was outside. Then he grinned wolfishly and picked up his rifle. It took good red meat to restore a sick man's strength, and there was plenty of 88 beef for the taking.

BILL BLACK followed Dan Logan at a distance when the old cowhand rode down the trail. Logan did not go far, and a yearling steer fell when Logan raised his rifle to his shoulder and took careful aim. Black crouched on a little shelf above the clearing and watched Logan skin out the 88 steer.

It was more than a month since he had left the 2 B. Black's face expressed the bitterness he felt as he though of all he had lost. He had worked eight years to build up the little cattle spread; eight years of hard labor and short pay. He had fought summer droughts and winter blizzards, but he had never quit.

Bill Black clenched his hands, as he qualified his thoughts. He had never quit until he was starved out, wracked with fever, and strangled with the smoke from his burning cabin. He remembered what old Dan had said about a man needing good red meat to do his best fighting.

Black glanced down the trail to-

ward Sundown. A horse-backer was coming through the lavas, and even in the saddle, the rider's shoulders were swaggering with confidence.

"It's that deputy!" Black muttered softly. "And the sheriff must be riding in the drag to back up his deputy's play!"

Bill Black crouched on the shelf about twelve feet above the clearing. Escape was cut off, and he hadn't bothered to reload his six-shooter which was hanging in Dan Logan's cabin up on the mesa. Before he could call a warning to Logan, the deputy rode into view.

Dan Logan was skinning out the young beef, and he did not hear the deputy until a harsh voice shouted. Logan whirled and came up with the skinning knife in his right hand, and then he saw the deputy with a gun just slipping out of the holster.

"I bring mine in dead," the swaggering deputy shouted at Logan. "You've dodged the law long enough, and I caught you butchering 88 beef!"

Dan Logan dropped the knife and raised both hands above his head. "I'm old enough to die!" he said simply. "I'd rather be dead than in jail!"

Bill Black hear the deputy click back the hammer of his six-shooter. Then Black leaped down and spread his arms wide. The gun exploded as Black tore the deputy from his saddle, and both men landed in a tangle of arms and legs in the grassy trail.

Bill Black rolled to his feet fighting like a wildcat. He battered the shouting deputy with vicious lefts and rights to the head and face, and Dan Logan stared with his bearded mouth wide open. Black set the deputy up with a left jab, crossed with a driving right to the jaw that knocked the killer flat on his back, and then followed up with both fists ready for more fight.

"Hold it, Bill Black!" a stern voice ordered sternly. "I've been trailing that killer since dawn, and thanks for helping me do my work!"

Black stiffened and raised his head. Sheriff Joe Cawthorn was smiling at him, but Dan Logan had taken to the brush. Cawthorn swung down from the saddle and clicked handcuffs around the wrists of the unconscious man. Then he snorted and jerked the badge from the prisoner's shirt.

"This killer ain't a deputy," Cawthorn told Black. "He's wanted for the murder of a deputy over in the next County, and I heard he was riding for Matt Dorn!"

"You mean...you mean you were not riding gun-sign on me?" Black asked slowly. "I shot this hombre more than a month ago when he served foreclosure papers on me. Must have just scratched him."

"So that's why you took off and let the 2 B rack along by herself," Cawthorn said quietly. "Who burned down your cabin?"

"I thought it was the law," Black answered. "Are you after Dan Logan sheriff?"

Joe Cawthorn smiled. "Well, I'd pick up Dan if he rode into Sundown," he admitted. "He's wanted for discharging firearms withing the city limits, and his fine would be twenty-five dollars."

"I'll tell him if I see him," Black promised, and he took a paper the sheriff handed to him.

"This killer is Bully Ed Train," the sheriff explained, as Black read the Wanted Poster. "A thousand dollar reward for him...Dead or alive, and I'll see that you get it!"

Bill Black felt a wave of weakness sweeping over him. He clutched the sheriff's arm for support until the weakness had passed, and Cawthorn watched with quiet understanding.

"Matt Dorn bought your paper from Jim Hasting, but I'll pay Dorn tomorrow," he told Black. "He never applied for any foreclosure, because he knew he couldn't get one. Suppose you ride to Sundown by late afternoon tomorrow, and I'll be busy some place else!"

BILL BLACK picked up the skinning knife Dan Logan had dropped. The sheriff had ridden back to Sundown with his prisoner, and Dan Logan came out of the brush

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The posse went across — when they'd paid the toll.

Digger John's Favor

by A. A. BAKER

(Author of "Digger John's Bank")

Digger John's intentions were of the very best — but his assistance to Josh Wallace seemed to be the kind that would send a man to boothill quick!

THE TWO men sat in front of the rough miner's cabin and gleefully dipped tablespoons into the soggy bread. They looked like a couple of lunatics on a picnic. They were both very drunk and very happy as they extended that exaggerated courtesy familiar to drinking people.

"After yew, Mr. Wallace' Fill yore spoon an' the best 'o luck to yew.... sup heartily, Mr. Wallace." Solemnly, Digger John spoke, as he leaned against the granite bank and watched the American River splash by.

"Thank you, sir," answered Josh Wallace. "Here's to your good health. May all your trials and tribulations be little ones!" He raised the spoonful of soggy dough to his lips and bwed slightly. "But wait, let me propose a toast! Let lady luck smile upon your grizzled head and endow

you with everlasting luck in your ventures. In your chase after the elusive will 'o the wisp; your search for gold, may the gods smile upon your endeavors To you' Digger John!" Whereupon, he noisely sucked the wet bread.

"Thet's a mighty fine speech. Edication's a powerful, beautiful thing to possses. Let me dip my spoon again an' see what comes out of me." Digger gulped dough and gazed pensively toward the top of the high canyon.

"Here's to yew, Josh Wallace. Here's to yore bridge, thet will someday carry the commerce of the mountains acrost this mighty river. Here's to—" Digger paused and laid a broad, hairy hand on Josh's arm. "Don't go an' git to weepin' agin! Someday, they'll be a use found fer yore bridge. Come on Josh, quit it! Have another drink, I mean, eat some more bread. Best bread a man ever had, bread soaked in whiskey. Eat an' drink, they say. By gosh, we're doin' both at the same time!'

Josh stopped his sniffles and barked into a sudden laugh.

"When I saw you come tumbling down that bank and heard the bottle break, I thought sure the red-eye would be gone. That bread in your sack sure came in handy."

"Happened onc't before, down by Marysville. Thet's how I learned the trick," chuckled Digger. "When yore carryin' likker in a sack, always have a loaf of bread in the sack too. Then, if'n yore bottle breaks, yew got yorself a messy loaf of bread but yew also got yore whisky, even if yew got to eat it with a tablespoon."

"You've been in California since the rush of '49, Digger. Tell me the truth now; of all the misfits, saints, sinners and snipe-hunters, did you ever run into a man crazy enough to build a bridge across a river where there isn't anyone to use it?" hiccoughed Josh.

"Don't yew go afeelin' sorry fer yoreself. Thet bridge is a mighty purty thang an' you've done a mighty fine piece of buildin'. If'n I could build a thing like thet I wouldn't be a lettin' nobody walk acrost it. I'd jest sit up here an' admire it!

"As fer answerin' yore question. I'll never forgit Barnard Berry. He was a animule doctor. Come out from the East jest after the first rush. Sunk a powerful might of money into a animule hospital. All kinda gadgets an' clean as a whistle. Used to feel like takin' the shoes offa the horses afore you'd let 'em go inside. Did fine until the burro shot out the lamp an' set the blasted place afire." Digger scooped up another spoonful of the bread and whiskey and gazed pensively at the water.

"Then, there was the fellow thet was agoin' to put the river in a canvas flume. He . . ."

JOSH Wallace rose from the ground in Scotch fury. He slammed his hat on the ground and, with a stumpy let, kicked a boulder into the water. "Digger John! If you start going around the bush and leaving another story unfinished, I'll break your head with this sledge! You're like a danged lawyer! They talk in circles until you have to leave more bewildered than you came in for advice." The Scot grasped a short handled sledge and swung it warningly. "Now tell me how a burro could shoot out a lamp!"

"Don't git riled, Josh. The animule was bit by a rattler. Yew know how they swell from the snake pisen. This burro swelled up so bad the Doc thought his nostrils would close an' he'd aspix— asflix . . . strangle from lack of breathin' air. All the Doc did was shove a couple shotgun shells in the burro's nose, figured to keep the anilmule alive until the swellin' went down." Digger bent over and scratched at the wet hole left by the boulder. "Got yore gold pan handy, Josh? This looks like pretty good gravel."

"I don't care if that's pure gold!

Digger sighed and continued. "Well, the burro swelled until he blew them cartridges plumb acros't thet hospital an' shot out the light. The Doc had got excited an' forgot to cut the base off'n the shells so the burro could breathe!

DIGGER JOHN'S FAVOR

"Say Josh, bring what's left of thet drinkin' bread an' let's go down an' walk acros't the bridge again."

The Scot revived, nodded happily and led the way. It was a beautiful structure. The peeled pine logs gave off a straw-like glint and the smell of fresh timber filled the canyon. Squared beams, sunk deep into the bedrock and every joint fir snug and true. For two hundred and forty feet it glistened and the water flowed beneath and danced shadows against the logs. It was a cantilever bridge, weighted on both ends and sprang out across the American River in a perfect arch. Wide enough for two freight wagons abreast. The floor boards were six inches thick and each board had been honed with an adz until not a sliver stuck out of place.

Josh Wallace was truly a bridge builder, as were his father and grandfather before him, but he'd made one mistake. He'd built his bridge off the traveled route. He'd built a toll bridge but there were no tolls. Thousands of square miles of canyons, mountains and forests stretched on the far side of the bridge but there just wasn't any gold over there and the men of the world had come to California for gold. Until gold was discovered in that vast wilderness on the far side of the American River the bridge would rot before Josh Wallace collected any tolls!

Digger felt badly about the wasted labors of his friend and had tried to ease his troubles. Many men had gone back into those canyons but none had hit a claim. Digger John was a noted pocket hunter and he had spent many months in vain search. It began to look like there just wasn't any need for the bridge

THE TWO men left the river and headed up the side of the steep canyon toward the mountain town of Gold Run. The town was seething with excitement. Miners, storekeeps and tradespeople, were gathered in excited groups. Josh and Digger John were too immersed in their

(Continued On Page 86)

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(Continued From Page 85)

troubles to take notice until they had firmly enscounced themselves in Dredger's Bar and had a deep drink of straight red-eye.

"What's the fuss, Dredger?" queried John.

"It's thet danged Murrietta, again! He raided this whole danged country. Hit in about eight places at onc't and got every pack train in the dang mountains! They's dead and wounded pack men on every trail! Slim Deakins is a roundin' up some of the men what has hosses to go after 'em. You wanta go?" shouted the stubby owner of Dredger's Bar.

"Not now. Josh and me got some drinkin' to do. Heh, Josh?" The Scot nodded glumly.

The mounted men thundered out of town toward Auburn and Digger and Josh Wallace proceeded to drink themselves into respective corners of the saloon.

Morning came and Josh wandered back to the river to lay in wait for someone to pay a toll to cross his bridge. He wasn't gone long before he panted his way back into town with the news that Murrietta had crossed his bridge!

"There are hoofprints all over! You can see where they came down the canyon and right acrossed that bridge and then disappeared on the far side! When Slim Deakins gets back, send him down the canyon. I'm aheading back! Tell Slim I'l give his posse a cut rate! Wheee!"

Slim's men searched the wilderness on the far side of the river for days. They camped and had supplies hauled in by wagon. Captain Loves' rangers appeared, crossed the bridge and joined in the search. Love had been down around Stockton on a cold trail amd was slightly put out because the Scot demanded toll.

"Look here, Wallace! I'm commissioned by the State Legislature to track down Murrietta, so why add more expense to the state for crossing this blasted bridge?"

"You're working for pay, Captain Love," bluntly answered Wallace. "As I built this bridge, I'm entitled to some return for my labors. So, pay your toll or go look for Murietta some

where else, where you don't have to cross any rivers!"

The captain paid and Josh Wallace jingled the coins while the Rangers trotted by.

The search continued for a couple of weeks and the hunters gave up and came out of the wilds, paid Josh another toll and departed. Murrietta had again escaped with loot worth thousands of dollars. The Raghill mining company was out over thirty thousand in bullion. Their pack train had been bringing out a month's cleanup when the raid hit and the pack train was driven off.

Digger John began his sniping trips again, across the river. Each time he paid his toll and each time he came back empty handed.

WEEKS passed and the Digger still persisted in his search for gold, where every prospector knew gold would not be found. He even got to going without his gold pan and that's when Dredger Dan got suspicious. What could be over on that side of the river that a pocket hunter like Digger would seek without a prospectors tools?

He got Digger John drunk and found out, but the entire population found out at the same time, and it started a rush. Digger was searching for the mule train with the thirty thousand dollars in bullion!

Josh happily pocketed the tolls of the rush. Men from Marysville Auburn, Sacramento and even a few from 'Frisco cantered, walked, and drove wagons across Josh's bridge to track down thirty thousand. The Southern Mines sent their quota and Oregon men drifted down from Weaverville and Redding County.

Digger got disgusted with the crowd and helped Wallace collect tolls. It was necesary to have a toll collector on both sides of the bridge because the rumors flew back and forth like the river bats. A fresh train could be found on either side, every other day or so. The jangle of pack train bells could be heard

(Continued On Page 88)

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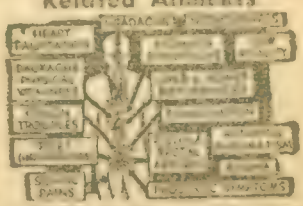

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FAMOUS WESTERN

(Continued From Page 87)

during the night and a fresh rush would be on in the morning. Men would be in the middle of the bridge when another rumor would turn them around and have them back-tracking.

There was talk of building another bridge to handle the traffic, one bridge for coming and another for going. It was quite a risk to be caught out in the middle when the rush going east would switch west as the result of another rumor.

Bulldog Belden was pushed into the rushing American River several times when he got caught in the middle. Bulldog was stubborn and would try to brest the tide like a canoe going upstream and would usually get pushed off the bridge. Digger and Josh would then fish him out and refund half his toll considering he only got half way across....

Dredger Dan built a tent bar and gambling joint near the bridge head. A cobbler, a merchant from Sacramento and a wandering blacksmith settled near the growing camp. One man brought in a cow and sold the milk for it's weight in gold. The cow had the wanderlust and led it's owner a merry chase through the canyons. The camp became known as Tollhouse and even had a near hanging.

News came in that one of Murrietta's men had been captured in Stockton and told the details of the raid on the Gold Run Territory. The mule trains had been driven down into the Sacramento Valley by the bandits. They had never crossed Wallace's bridge!

That brought on the near hanging. Josh Wallace and Digger John were struggling on the opposite ends of a stout rope for their deception when the news of a real gold strike hit Tollhouse. Digger had confessed that he had driven his mules across the bridge so Josh could collect some tolls. Only one rope was available so it had been looped over a thick branch, the two men stood on whiskey barrels and the whiskey

(Continutd On Page 90)

THE GHOST WALKS

(Continued From Page 72)

swarthy half breed became less swarthy. His gun hand wavered and then whipped up. The gun flashed again. Thorny wsn't a hundred feet from him—and he continued to advance.

Medicine fired again. Thorny laughed.

A fourth and fifth time Medicine fired and with each shot he grew whiter. His lips slavered.

A sixth shot blazed. Still Thorny came on. The gun clicked harmlessly.

Medicine Joe staggered. He clutched once at his throat and crumpled to the street.

The young doctor finished his examination and stood up.

"Dead," he said. "I warned him he had an advanced angina—er, bad heart," he qualified to the ring of curious.

Thorny said, "Isn't it true, Doc, that people with bad hearts sleep pretty sound?"

"This man isn't asleep," snapped the young doctor tartly.

"No, but he was," said Thorny in an aside. And to Pete Hamas he added, "He shure was dead to the world when I slipped into his room and put blanks in his artillery. Guess I must of frightened him to death. What d' y' know?"

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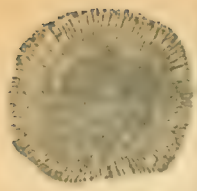

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(Continued From Page 88)

barrels would be kicked from under their feet! Digger had exonerated Josh but the miners were in a mood to hang two men, so Josh was strung up to keep Digger company. Digger had also confessed driving his mules from one side of the river to the other during the night, to keep the traffic going both ways. The miners were real put out and figured a double hanging was necessary to ease the ridicule they would receive when the story got out. Also, if Josh Wallace were hung, the bridge would be toll-free in the future.

THE NEWS of the strike saved further stretching of the two necks. The owner of the cow charged into town and told his story. His cow had wandered off again and exposed a quartz! The cow owner was smart and refused to tell where the quartz ledge was exposed. He made it plain. "I've spent days and nights looking for that cow, while the rest of you have been prospecting. Now, I'll get a reward and it'll be mine! Heh, heh! By golly, that's good! Minded my cow and my cow mined for me. I'll call it the Lost Cow Mine and it'll all belong to me!"

That wasn't the way the rest of the miners felt at all. One shouted, "Git another rope!" but the only rope handy was loped around Digger John's neck and he was vainly attempting to hold his weight off his neck by pulling himself up the rope. Each time he jerked himself up, to ease the weight on his neck, Josh, dangling on the other end, attempted to hold his weight by the same proceedure and would kick Digger a smash in the stomach.

The men cut Josh and Digger down so as to use the rope for stringing up the cow owner, but they hardly got his feet off ground when he pointed out where the ledge was located and the crowd unstrung him and rushed for the quartz diggings!

Digger and Josh sat in the dust of the street and watched the stampede of departing miners. They loked out at the bridge and Josh sighed.

"Digger, don't *ever* do me another favor!"

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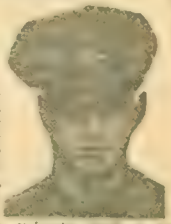

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You Will Bless the Day You Answered This Advertisement

(Continued From Page 82)

and coughed behind a grimy hand. Black looked up with a smile.

"First time I ever saw you high-tail, Dan," Black chided the old rawhider. "The sheriff says to tell you to ride in and pay a twenty-five dollar fine for shooting off your hardware within the city limits."

"That deputy meant to kill me," Logan said boldly, and then he looked sheepish. "It was the sheriff who spooked me," he confessed. "I don't aim to spend no time shut off away from the sun!"

"We'll ride into Sundown tomorrow," Black said carelessly. "I've got some business with Matt Dorn, and it can't wait any longer!"

"More business than you think," Logan said thinly. "Take a good look at the brand on that hide, Bill."

"We've been eating 88 beef," Black said with a shrug. "The sheriff let on not to see this kill."

"We've been eating 2 B beef," Dan Logan corrected, and he took a sqaure of dried hide from his shirt pocket. "Hold that brand up to the light, and tell me what you see!"

Black took the piece of hide and held it up to t he light. "Look, Dan," he said tensely. "This brand was originally my 2 B iron. You can tell by the healed scars. It's been vented to make an 88, and you can see the new burn where the brand hasn't healed or haired over. Holding it up to the light, it's as plain as day!"

"Yeah," Dan Logan agreed. "So now you know what happened to about four hundred head of your 2 B critters!"

"Yeah, I know now," Black said quietly. "Let's get this meat back up to your hide-out, and you mind if I borrow the loan of your razor? What I mean is Dan, I'm coming out from behind the brush."

TWO STRANGERS sat across the table in Dan Logan's little cabin, staring at each other with friendly eyes that read all the answers, and each thoroughly understood the other. They had suffered common afflictions and hardships; each had borrowed strength from the

other in the desperate hours of need.

Bill Black had shaved first, humming softly with surprise as the heavy beard fell away under the keen straight razor. He saw a face that was thin, but the ruddy color told him of good health. A pair of steady gray eyes had gazed back at him, and there had been no tremble in the hand that had wielded the blade.

Dan Logan had been a bit different. His face had not known the touch of razor for three years, and the years fell from him as the long beard had been removed from his leathery features. He had stared at the reflection of a man he had long forgotten; a man who seemed to come to life with new hope and courage as the mask of an old man had been removed.

"Beef steak for breakfast," Logan said with a quiet satisfaction. "It takes good red meat to build the right kind of blood!"

"Fever is like a fire," Bill Black said thoughtfully. "It burns away all the trash, but it seldoms hurts the metal."

Logan nodded understanding. He had never referred to the weaknesses which had beaten Bill Black from a strong enduring fighter, to a tearful wreck of a man. Dan Logan remembered the days of his one extremities; the care and nursing by Black, and the many trips the young 2 B owner had made to bring him provisions.

They ate silently, cleaned up the dishes, and saddled the horses. Dan Logan brought a box of cartridges and both men loaded their six-shooter, and filled the loops in their belts.

"We're pards now, Dan," Black said quietly. "We'll build a new cabin on the 2 B, and it's share and share alike. Press the flesh!"

Dan Logan listened and smiled happily as he detected the old deep note of confidence and courage in Bill Black's voice. He swung his arm and thwacked palms, and the two men gripped hard, testing the strength of each other.

(Continued On Page 94)

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FAMOUS WESTERN

(Continued From Page 93)

"Right, pard," Dan Logan agreed, and the stoop fell away from his shoulder. "Let's take it to them!"

SHERIFF Joe Cawthorn looked up when a tall man walked into the jail office. There was something vaguely familiar about the stranger; Joe Cawthorn was sure he had seen that weathered face before. An old cowhand from every indication, and Cawthorn frowned when the stranger produced three worn ten-dollar bills and laid them on the scarred desk.

"Twenty-five and costs, you said my fine would be," the oldster said quietly. "Write out a receipt, Joe. And stop staring like you didn't know me. I'm Dan Logan, and don't hooraw an old-timer!"

"Dan, you old maverick!" the sheriff greeted the law-dogger, and he offered his big right hand. "Welcome home, feller, and I never looked very hard for you."

The sheriff wrote out a receipt and handed it to Dan Logan with some change. He looked steadily at the old cowhand, coughed softly, and nodded his head.

"Matt Dorn is up at the General Store," he told Logan. "I'll be in the office of the Justice across the street. I seldom interfere unless there is gun-play!"

Logan nodded and left the office. Bill Black was waiting with the horses, and Logan relayed the sheriff's message. Black rubbed the handles of his six-shooter for a moment, stared at the dusty street, and then nodded.

"Let's ride," he said to Logan. "We'll play the cards the way they are dealt to us. If it's a square deal, you don't buy openers!"

MATT DORN came out of the General Store just as Black and Logan rode up to the tie-rail and dismounted. Three 88 hands followed Dorn and leaned against the front when they recognized Bill Black, Dorn took one look and blustered up to meet Black.

"I told you to quit the country, and you said you was leaving!" Dorn shouted at the 2 B owner. "Looks

like you didn't have enough, and I've given you your last chance!"

"One of us is leaving, Dorn," Bill Black answered quietly. "It won't be me!"

Matt Dorn stopped and stared at the man he had ruined. He saw six feet tall, a hundred and ninety pounds of brawn and whalebone. A heavy six-shooter hung from his holster, and Dorn's right hand was close to the gun. His eyes flickered to the tall stranger with Black.

Dan Logan straightened slowly and then made a swift pass for his six-shooter. He covered Matt Dorn and the three 88 hands; spoke in a crisp voice as he gave his orders.

"Elevate, you sneakin' rustler. I'm taking your hardware to keep you honest while my boss and yours settles a little argurment!"

Bill Black remained silent while Dan Logan emptied the four holsters. Logan laid the captured six-shooters on the loading platform, stepped back several paces, and gave Bill Black the go-ahead.

"Take it to him, partner!"

"I've paid the money I owed on my note," Black told the scowling 88 boss. "I earned that money by catching a phoney deputy who was wanted for murder. I've been eating beef for more than a month, and I'm not half dead with a fever. You ready?"

Matt Dorn listened intently. He knew that he had lost the 2 B land, and his little eyes began to blaze with a furious anger. He rushed Bill Black with his big arms flailing, counting on the element of surprise.

Bill Black shifted to the side; stuck out his left boot as the 88 boss hurtled past. Matt Dorn tripped and sprawled to his hands and knees, and Black was waiting when he came to his feet.

Black's left fist pistoned out and crashed against Dorn's right eye. A driving right landed flush on Dorn's broad nose, bringing a gush of crimson. Dorn snorted and sucked his head down between his shoulders as he charged the slender cowboy like an enraged range bull.

Once again Bill Black danced away without taking a blow. Matt Dorn

(Continued On Page 96)

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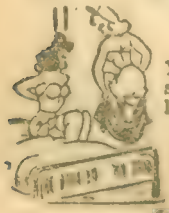

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(Continued From Page 95)

whirled and brought the fight to Black, but now the big man was cautious. Bill Black was on top of him, flicking rights and lefts into Dorn's battered face, and the 88 boss covered his face with his thick arms.

Bill Black smiled coldly and sent a straight right into his opponent's belly. Matt Dorn grunted and doubled over with pain. His arms went down to protect his mid-riff and then it happened!

Black swung an uppercut from his boots with all his weight and muscle behind the blow. His fist crashed against the square jaw and lifted Matt Dorn from his feet. The 88 boss landed on his broad back, stirred up a cloud of dust, and then sagged down like a worn rope.

Bill Black waited with a cold smile on his smooth-shaven face, blowing on his skinned knuckles. A door opened across the street, and Sheriff Joe Cawthorn came slowly across the boardwalk. Black waited for the heavy hand he expected on his shoulder, but the sheriff stopped and stared at Matt Dorn who was just sitting up.

"I caught up with a rustler, Sheriff," Black told the peace officer, and his left hand went to the pocket of his faded hickory shirt. "I've lost more than four hundred head of 2 B cattle, and every one of those critters are wearing a vented brand."

Matt Dorn pushed up to his feet. He headed for the horse-trough, doused his head under the water, and dried on his neckerchief. He listened with his head down as the sheriff questioned Bill Black.

"You got any idea who rustled your beef, Bill?"

"Take a look at this brand, Joe," Black answered, and he handed Cawthorn the piece of hide.

"This is an 88 brand," Cawthorn said slowly. "That's Matt Dorn's iron!"

"Yeah, well hold that piece of hide up to the light," Black suggested. "You can see where the old brand had healed and haired over; and where the rustlers changed that 2 B to read 88. Dan Logan and me are pards, and

we're going to round up every head of my rustled beef!"

"Don't move, Dorn!" the sheriff barked, and his six-shooter was in his hand as he spoke. "You and those cowhands of yours are under arrest, and anything you say will be used against you!"

Dan Logan came to stand beside Bill Black as the sheriff herded his prisoners off to jail. Logan's eyes twinkled as he gravely offered his hand to his young partner.

"I'm hungry, Bill," he complained. "It's time for a late dinner, and I could do with a thick steak. Now you take good red meat that away Bill. When a man's down on bed-ground with his head under him, there's nothing like grass-fed beef to build up his fighting blood!"

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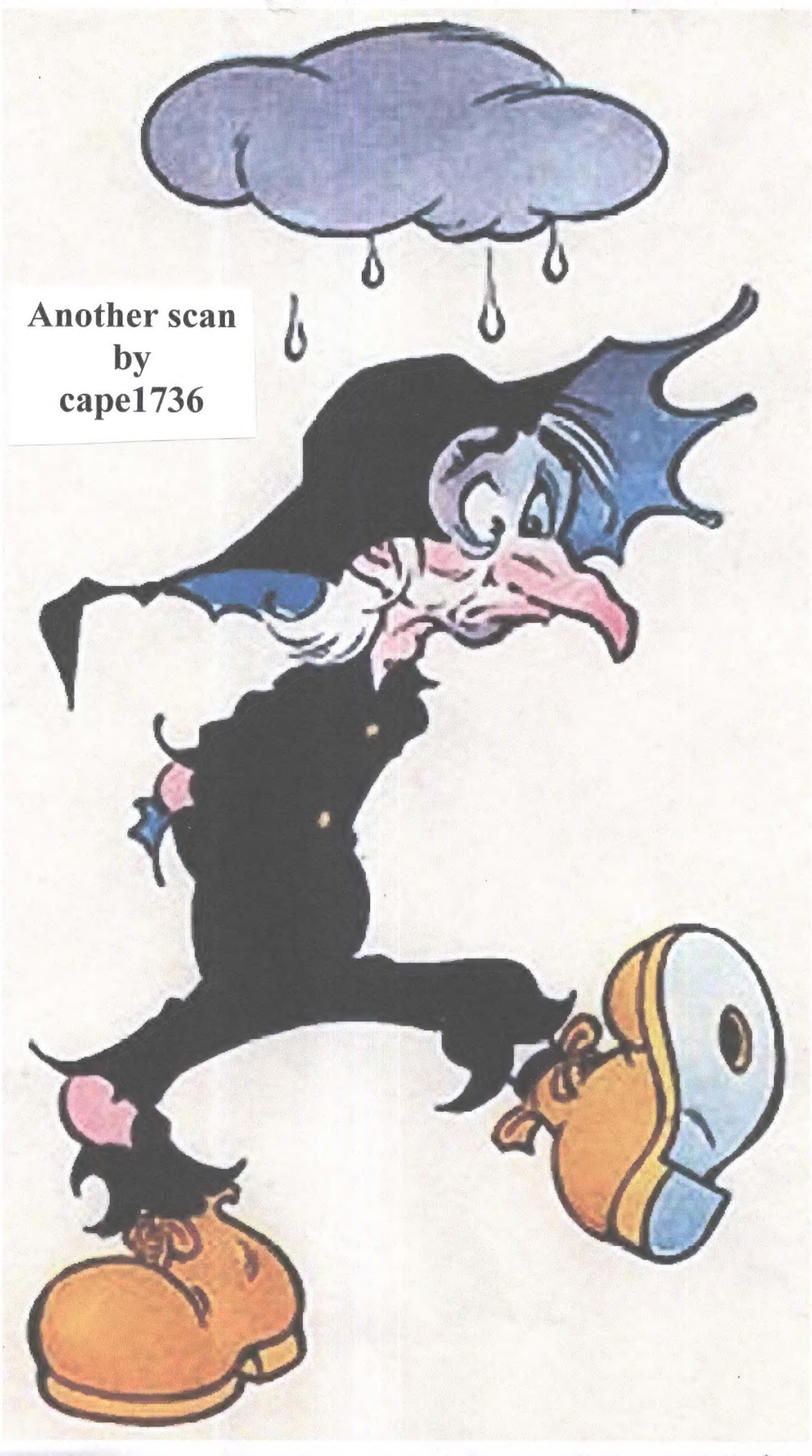
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